

# PONDER REVIEW

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Mississippi University  
for Women

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# PONDER REVIEW

Editors: Jennifer Armstrong, Leslie Cardwell, Christian J. Collier, Beverly Heasley, Tomia Jones, Karin Fazio Littlefield, Kerri J. Roe, Mckensi C. White, Morgan Wilson, Ronald Zack

Advisor: Kendall Dunkelberg

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## A NOTE TO READERS

Since 2016, Ponder Review has sought out literary and visual artists alike whose work embodies and reshapes the human experience through both universal truths and distinctive perspectives. With this issue, we continue this legacy by showcasing the unique crafts of this edition's inventive authors and the captivating artistry of its refined visual artists.

This collection demonstrates the profound ways in which the condition of being human can be shared and explored. These pieces not only speak to us as people, but they speak to each other as art. In many of the works we received, life, death, and the complexities of connection/missed connection/ruptured connection were threads woven into their narratives. Following those threads, we have carefully arranged the works so that they converse about themes dealing with nature, the body, the mind, and the soul. Our edition invites you to ponder the avenues through which literary and visual art links you to the metaphysical realm of our interconnectedness.

Over the course of the selection and layout process, our editors, both seasoned and new, have bonded through deep discussions about the overarching message we wish to share with our readers with the selection we have chosen. Editors from across the continent participated in midnight layout conversations and wee-morning-hour thematic consultations. In the end, we hope that you, too, will be moved to recognize our collective humanity and to let compassion flow outward. We thank all of our contributors and hope that you enjoy this collection as much as we do.

Sincerely,

*The Editors*

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CHRISTA FAIRBROTHER

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## A REAL LIFE FAIRYTALE

A single woman working blue-collar jobs isn't afforded  
daydreams of running away to France.

Yet double shifts, warehousing household relics,  
buys an adieu. Cliché is French after all.

She strolls the Champs Elysees, falls in love  
with the view from the Eiffel Tower,

gelato from red germaniumed cafés.  
Art is brought out of history. She stands

two feet away from the Mona Lisa,  
whom she'd only met in slides.

Finds Marat, dead in his bath, solves  
the who done it. Van Gogh's sunflowers bend to face her

yellows so bright they bear his name,  
is washed clean in Chagall's blue light.

She's found her Gothic god in the tessellated  
glass, light penetrates an unseen gap, splits her open.

The cathedral bells ring, reverberate backward in time,  
sing to the woman working dead-end jobs, chime dream bigger.

ANGEL ROSEN

---

IN WHICH WE TELL EACH OTHER WE ARE  
AFRAID OF SOMETHING

A friend tells me his biggest fear is a meteor coming down  
and destroying the earth.

I tell him that I want us all to die,  
that eliminates the decision.

No one has to leave a note or figure out what to do  
the last time they see someone.

He wants to go to six different bars for his birthday.

I want to leave this one at this very second.

I tell Buddy I'll put him in a poem when he's sober.

No one is ever serious enough. There is always  
someone class-clowning even a decade  
after high school. I feel like I'm in a one-woman  
show in the middle of the dining room,  
hoping to someday, get to the point.

Has anyone stopped to consider that the milk  
is still boiling on the stove and the leaking bottle  
in the cabinet says: *refrigerate after opening?*

I never poured milk into the pot,

I never bought that dressing to begin with.

I'm just dealing with decisions

I was left in the circumstance of.

One of my friends is dead now.

She told me once her biggest fear is breaking  
her arm and leg at the same time.

Now I find myself rolling over in bed  
to text her to ask her if she knows there will be  
a new season of that show we watched.

She will ask what time it is  
and I won't have the heart to tell her.

*Insomnia again.*

I should be on the Empire State Building,  
broadcast as the evening news jumper.

They will ask me what made me really do it this time  
and I won't have the heart to tell them. *Mania again.*



I pour every ruined thing down the drain of my kitchen sink.  
I tell someone that my biggest fear is  
putting my hand into the garbage disposal  
and it turns on. I say this because telling them that  
being okay is my biggest fear, they will not believe me.

I hope the meteor comes soon  
and someone asks the dinosaur who their favorite human was.  
I hope someone chooses me.

ANDY BROWN

---

## AROUND

Interrogation room. There is a table, two chairs opposite each other, and a water cooler with cups. Nothing out of the ordinary.

At rise, WARREN TRIMBLE enters the space. WARREN is in his late forties. He's dressed casually in khakis and a button down shirt and is well groomed.

*(WARREN investigates the room.)*

WARREN: Hello? Anyone here?! Hello. I'm pretty sure I don't belong in here. Hello?!

*(WARREN runs his fingers along the table. He considers the space and decides to sit. But at which seat? He pulls out one chair and starts to sit but second guesses himself.)*

WARREN: No, this doesn't feel right.

*(WARREN moves to the chair opposite of him and takes a seat as BIG G enters.)*

BIG G: You're in my seat.

*(BIG G stands by the table and waits for WARREN to move. BIG G is dressed in professional garb, has the look of a detective, and carries a stack of files. WARREN stares up blankly.)*

WARREN: Seriously?

BIG G: Do I look like I'm joking?

WARREN: What difference does it make where I sit? Where you sit? I don't even know why I'm here.

BIG G: I've got all day, Warren. Besides, the seat you're in is closer to the water cooler. And I like my drinkies.

*(WARREN huffs, gets up deliberately, crosses to the other chair, and sits.)*

WARREN: Happy?

BIG G: Ecstatic.

*(BIG G crosses to their seat, throws down the stack of files, and gets comfortable.)*

WARREN: Hang on a minute. How did you know my name?

BIG G: It's all in here. *(Opens file)* Warren Trimble. Born April 12. Forty-nine

years old. Only child. Outdoorsman. Looks like you've done ten...no, twelve triathlons in the last decade. Nice. Avid reader. Avid drinker. Did I leave anything out?

WARREN: Yeah. I'm a big fan of Bridgerton.

BIG G: Julie Andrews is a national treasure.

WARREN: Look, this is all very amusing, but why do you have a file on me? Where am I? And who the hell are you?

BIG G: You can call me Big G. (*Lighting special on Big G with sound effect of a heavenly sustained note or obnoxious air horns*) Let's just say I'll be conducting your interview today.

WARREN: This is an interrogation room.

BIG G: It is. And I have a lot of questions for you.

WARREN: I haven't done anything wrong.

BIG G: Well, what if I told you that you were guilty of....murder?

WARREN: Murder?! I haven't murdered anyone.

BIG G: I'm joking. Settle down. You didn't murder anyone. You just killed yourself.

WARREN: You're crazy. I didn't commit suicide.

BIG G rises and gets WARREN a cup of water from the water cooler.

BIG G: I failed to mention that part in your file. Death, June 29. Self inflicted. Here. Have a drink. We've got a lot of ground to cover.

WARREN: I'm not dead. I'm breathing. I'm breathing! I'm in a stupid room with a lunatic, but I'm not dead.

BIG G: The breathing is more of a residual response. Leftover from before. It won't last. Have a drink. You'll feel better.

(*WARREN takes a sip to humor BIG G. Reacts. Drinks again.*)

WARREN: Is this Surge?

BIG G: That it is.

WARREN: But it's clear.

BIG G: The liquid changes to fit the drinker. It's meant to elicit a pleasant memory. You're under a lot of stress right now.

WARREN: What I'm under is false arrest. You've got no reason to keep me here. (*Drinks*) God, this is good. Do you know how long it's been since I've had one of these?

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BIG G: Twenty-six years, I believe.

WARREN: How do you...? (*Huffs*) I'm not dead. I wouldn't kill myself.

BIG G: I'm pretty particular when it comes to my files. Warren, what's the last thing you remember?

WARREN: I was getting ready for bed. I put on some white noise...distant thunderstorms. I ran a bath to relax. I do it all the time. It helps me sleep.

BIG G: Anything else?

WARREN: No. I probably dozed off and went right to bed. I've got a lot on my plate this week at the warehouse.

BIG G: Roll up your sleeves for me, Warren.

WARREN: Why? Do you have a wrist fetish, Big G? (*Light special and sound effect for BIG G. WARREN looks around.*) Is this going to happen every time I say Big G? (*Light special and sound effect for BIG G.*)

BIG G: Probably. Just humor me.

*(BIG G refills WARREN's cup as WARREN rolls up his sleeve. To his horror, there are bandages around his wrist with vertical, blood-soaked stains.)*

WARREN: What the hell is this?!

BIG G: Drink, Warren. You'll feel better.

*(WARREN fumbles for the cup and takes a huge, shaky drink. Groans with the flicker of a memory.)*

WARREN: Beaujolais. How?

BIG G: I have no control over what the liquid becomes. The first was to relax you. This one...well, it should flip the switch for you. Go on.

*(WARREN takes another sip. Awareness.)*

WARREN: No.

BIG G: I know. This is the hard part. But you've got to go through it.

WARREN: I can't.

*(BIG G grabs a cup and fills it. Downs the contents and sighs with pleasure.)*

BIG G: Delicious.

WARREN: What does yours taste like?

BIG G: Root beer. The last time I was on Earth, it hadn't been invented yet. It's my favorite.

WARREN: And where are we now?

BIG G: Nowhere. In between. Not on Earth.

WARREN: I don't understand any of this.

BIG G: Neither do I. That's why you're here. Have another sip. It'll help.

*(BIG G takes a seat and pats WARREN's hand. WARREN recoils and rolls down his sleeves. Sips his drink.)*

WARREN: There was a blight. In the wine fields. We barely salvaged enough for this vintage. I'd never tasted anything so rich. But I lost everything after that. It destroyed me.

BIG G: Harvest? You weren't a vintner, Warren.

WARREN: No, *I* wasn't. It was..Jean. I was Jean then. I remember. Everything...to a point. I think.

BIG G: How is that possible?

WARREN: Well, it is really good wine. *(Beat)* I take it that this isn't the norm.

BIG G: You retain what you need for the next life. Nothing more. How far back can you recall?

WARREN: Images mostly. Impressions. I remember a name. Ethan, a dock worker on the Thames. Long ago. He drowned loading a merchant ship in a storm, just jumped in. Lost his family in the plague. But this Beaujolais. I made this. I had everything. And lost it. It feels like I keep losing. Every time.

BIG G: Wow. It takes a lot to surprise me, Warren. Well done.

WARREN: It's not important. I was tired. I'm always tired. That's why I'm here.

BIG G: I would've recommended a vacation.

WARREN: You're funny. Mind if I grab a refill?

BIG G: Help yourself.

*(WARREN fills his cup and takes a quick sip. Then another.)*

WARREN: Blueberry Zeltzer Seltzer? What is this place?

BIG G: I like to think of it as a reminder.

WARREN: Of what? That there is beauty in the mundane?

BIG G: Isn't there?

WARREN: Of course there is! I'm not disputing the existence of beauty. Sometimes there was so much I choked on it. *(Beat)* I guess I stopped seeing the point of it.

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BIG G: Of life.

WARREN: Yes. Everything ends. Why shouldn't I get to choose when?

BIG G: There. That's why you're here. I needed to try to understand what keeps leading you to this choice.

WARREN: Keeps leading.

BIG G: In the past three-hundred fifty years, you have not lived past the age of fifty. Not once. I don't get it. Every single life, you cut it short. Inexplicably. Ethan. Jean. Even now.

WARREN: That long? It feels longer. Look. It's not like I stopped taking pleasure in things. I just...I just. Okay. So the first drink I had from that thing was Surge. I don't even think it's made anymore. But it took me back to my sophomore year in college, ya know? It was like the first big loss for me, for Warren. I had an entire circle of friends graduate that year, and it devastated me. But I accepted then that life was a series of hellos and goodbyes. Of endings. So we milked every last moment we could together that night before we went our separate ways. We were lying on the soccer field, heads on each others stomachs in a circle, and we stared at the stars, reminisced, and talked about the future. And then the clouds rolled in. It rained. It was over. I had known death before then, known endings. But this one hit different.

BIG G: And?

WARREN: What do you mean...and? I just got tired of it. I'm not very good at letting go.

BIG G: But that's the nature of existence. Beauty is fleeting. Life is struggle. Nothing lasts forever. Blah blah blah.

WARREN: You can take your universal truths and go to hell. I'm tired of losing people. I'm tired of losing myself. I'm tired of pointless systems that help no one and make life harder for everyone. And before you say it, yes, I know that even privileged people have difficult lives in their own way. I just don't see the point anymore. I've worked my whole life. My whole lives. But the good stuff, the meaningful stuff, feels like a blip on the radar when you compare it to the bullshit we wade through on a daily basis.

BIG G: What would you change?

WARREN: I don't know! That's why I'm here. It's like an impossible puzzle. (*References water cooler*) Beaujolais. I worked myself, Jean worked himself to the bone in French wine fields in the 1800s. Then the great blight came. He lost everything and drank himself to death. (*Beat*) My dad and I would ride country roads when I was a kid and shoot coke cans and beers bottles

off bridges with his pistol. And then on the way home he'd treat me to...ta da! A Blueberry Zeltzer Seltzer. Now my dad can barely walk and doesn't know who he is half the time. Let me ask you something. Should I celebrate the frailty of old age? Should I revel in my own decline as a human being while strangers wipe my ass, and just linger on until I wither and die from natural causes? Screw that.

BIG G: What do you want?

WARREN: Peace. I just want peace. And I want to stop losing everything that matters to me, even when I'm responsible for that loss. And I know that's impossible.

BIG G: Nothing is impossible.

WARREN: Maybe if you're God. *(Beat)* Jesus H Christ, you're God, aren't you?

BIG G: I'm more comfortable with Big G. *(Light special and sound effect for BIG G)* Warren, you have chosen premature death for the past seven of your many lives. I don't know how to help you.

WARREN: Can you stop all the endings?

BIG G: It's the endings that give beauty and significance to living.

WARREN: I just can't anymore. It's too hard sticking around when all I feel is loss. And lost.

BIG G: You keep coming back to endings, how you can't accept them. And yet you keep choosing to end.

WARREN: I can control two things in my life: how I live and how I die. But it is my choice. Why should I wait to lose everyone I love like Ethan? Or devastating poverty like Jean?

*(WARREN crosses to water cooler for another drink as he talks. Sips. Reacts. His mind is wheeling back. His breath catches, flooded with memories from before.)*

Or lose my darling Solange like...Solange. No.

BIG G: Warren?

WARREN: Solange. My baby girl. *(Drinks again)* This is mead. I taught her to make it from local botanicals in our village. I was her mother. My name was Bertrand. She died in my arms, not even ten years old. I thought losing her would be the death of me.

BIG G: But it wasn't. Do you remember why?

WARREN: I met Lawrence. He helped me...helped Bertrand come alive again. We had our own family, and it muted my grief. Made me see that

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moving forward, moving on, was the only way beyond the sorrow. And that was enough for Bertrand. But it's not enough for me.

BIG G: Bertrand was the last life where you chose to live. *(Sighs)* So much loss in one soul, and that loss has tethered itself to you. You want peace, but I don't think it's something I can just give to you.

WARREN: But you're the Creator of the Universe.

BIG G: That's up for debate. I suppose there is something I could give you.

WARREN: What?

BIG G: Oblivion.

WARREN: Sounds kinda final.

BIG G: It is, Warren. There's no coming back from it. And that's all I've got for you. You can start another life and maybe forge some sort of peace for yourself. But no life is free from conflict. The other option is to be gone forever.

WARREN: It's not like I haven't tried. I've experienced so much. So many beautiful moments. It's just that sometimes....it feels like it's all for nothing. Kindness and love and beauty, yes. But everything else seems pointless.

BIG G: I know. And that, unfortunately, is just another aspect of the Wheel of Life.

WARREN: You don't make this easy.

BIG G: I have been told that.

*(WARREN fills the cup and takes a long drink.)*

WARREN: One for the road. Hmm, root beer. You're right, this is good. Alright, Big G *(light special and sound effect for BIG G)*. End me.

*(BIG G nods, raises their hand, and snaps their fingers in conjunction with the blackout.)*

THE END.



수연 최 ZANOO CHOI

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## BEYOND FRAME 2



JEFFREY HANTOVER

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## A BRIDE OF CHRIST TAKES A HUSBAND

*"A quake in L'Aquila in 1349 killed 800 residents; another in 1703 killed more than 3,000, prompting Pope Clement XI to send priests and nuns freed of their celibacy to repopulate the city."*

*Michael Kimmelman*

We lined up in the piazza among the rubble. The priests had drawn numbers from a wooden bowl. Some of us were still wearing our habits as that was all the clothes we had. We took off our wimples, so they could see our hair and face more fully. I smiled as they passed by, one after the other. They chose the big hipped and bosomed among us, thinking they would be the best bearer of many children. I lost count, I think he was the twelfth. The number of our Savior's disciples, a blessed number. He was a slight young man with no beard to speak of. He stopped. His eyes caressed my face. He held out his hand, "I am Arnaldo," he said. I took his hand, "I am Sister..." I paused, "I am Lucia," I said. That was my birth name. Holding my hand he said, "Lucia, let us sit in the shade and talk." We found a quiet corner of the ruined cloister. "I can sew," I said. "I can chop wood and milk goats. My mother said I made the best cheese in the village." "Lucia," he started every sentence he spoke to me with my name. "My father was a cobbler. He wanted me to follow him, but God called me. My father will send me tools and leather. People need shoes. Sometimes I lose my temper, but I am a good man." Every night for a week we walked to the edge of the village. We sat on a tree stump and watched the sunset. The sky darkened, and we walked back, barely speaking, our love blessed by the light of God's stars.

JULIA PHILIPP

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## A TRIP WITH THE ITALIAN PRIESTS

The husky sound of an engine ricochets off the walls of the empty office, then grinds to a halt. Alone, I rise to greet the visitors: two white men in khaki pants and button-down shirts. We are in a small town in the French-speaking part of Cameroon, hemmed in by dense equatorial forest.

“Bonjour,” a man says. His face is pink from the soupy mid-morning heat. “I am Père Mariano, and this is Père Laurent. We heard there was a new American volunteer in town.”

“Oui, je m’appelle Julia,” I say. “Do you live here?”

“We live at the Catholic mission on the other side of town,” he says. “After the Texaco station.” I picture the old-fashioned Texaco station, with its curved 1950’s-style gas pumps. It reminds me of home. I feel like I’m in another world here, a new Peace Corps volunteer in Africa—but hey, there’s a vintage Texaco station.

“What type of projects are you working on?” Père Laurent asks. He is a large, stout man with a bushy brown beard, arms covered with thick, curly hair, and beads of sweat clinging to his forehead. He reminds me of a stuffed bear.

“I wish I could do some real work,” I say. “My office is disorganized and there’s no work for me to do.”

“What type of work are you supposed to do?” Père Mariano asks. He is a slender, unassuming man with wire-rimmed glasses and a calming presence.

“Organize village projects, like building wells and health clinics, and train people. I have Red Cross training in first aid and CPR.”

I try to sound confident, but I’m not sure why the Peace Corps sent me here. My job is to work hand in hand with the local community development office, but the head of the office rarely shows up; and if he’s not around, my colleagues go home. Before joining the Peace Corps, I worked for a non-profit in New York promoting education on issues like poverty alleviation and women’s rights in less-developed countries. I was tired of just talking about the issues and wanted to do something – anything – to help.

The two men turn and speak to each other in low voices in Italian. Père Mariano clears his throat.

“We’re holding a workshop in a few days for the Forest People,” Père Mariano says. The Forest People, diminutive in size, are said to be the original inhabitants of Central Africa. “They live about an eight-hour drive

from here, near the border with Gabon. Would you like to join us? You could teach first aid and CPR.”

“Really?” I ask, holding my breath. Finally, something to do. Real work. Not just sitting in an empty office.

“Si,” Mariano says.

“I’d love to!” It sounds adventurous and important. My heart does a little tap dance.

“Buono,” Père Mariano says. “We’ll pick you up Thursday morning around eight. Where do you live?”

“In the Muslim quarter, opposite the mosque.” My housing situation is temporary – the other Peace Corps volunteer in town, a guy in his mid-thirties in the agricultural cooperative program, offered me a room—so that’s where my suitcases are parked.

“I know the place,” Père Laurent says. They talk in Italian.

“Then it’s settled,” Père Mariano says with a smile.

\* \*

Two days later, my cotton t-shirt sticks to my back as I heave my canvas bag into the cargo area of the priests’ truck. Hot, humid air hangs over the neighborhood. It feels like I am in a giant steam bath.

Père Laurent motions for me to climb into the front seat between the two priests who are exchanging wisecracks in Italian. Once inside, I pull my shoulders inward and look straight ahead. It is an uncomfortable seating arrangement but one can’t complain when being transported to Forest People lands. I’m excited and don’t want to seem whiny. We drive the two blocks through town past a dry goods store, a bakery, and Dr. Nico’s Radio Disco Service. The pavement ends abruptly, giving way to a reddish-brown dirt road surrounded by thick equatorial forests with vines hanging from the tops of trees, giant spider webs, echoing bird calls, and animals whoop-whooping in the distance. Père Mariano pulls off the road and waves to an identical truck that passes us.

“Are they going with us?” I ask.

“Oui,” Père Laurent says. “That’s our translator, our cook, and our mécanicien.” I don’t know whether to be alarmed or reassured about the mechanic. There’s only so much anyone can do to fix a broken axle in the forest.

As we drive south toward the border with Gabon, the hairy arm of Père Laurent brushes against me a few times. I pull my arms in to avoid physical contact, but he keeps bumping into me. Then he nudges me with his shoulder deliberately, looks at me with twinkling eyes, and pats my knee. *I can’t believe he’s a priest!* Père Mariano lets out a deep sigh and shakes his head while I make myself as compact as possible. Père Laurent looks at the road and hums, as if nothing happened.

We pass by small villages with mud huts and an occasional soccer field. There are no signs of electricity or running water. As the hours go by, the villages grow further apart and disappear. The windshield is spattered with mud, and the road is washed away in spots. My neck and shoulders ache from being jolted in and out of ditches, combined with leaning away from a hands-on priest.

“I hope we can reach our destination before sunset,” Père Mariano says, “but a lot depends on the condition of the roads. If it’s too muddy, we may have to get out and push.” Père Laurent snorts in feigned amusement. A thick canopy of moss and vines hangs over the road, pierced at different angles by the sunlight.

As I look around at the lush forest, my thoughts drift aimlessly. I try to remember whether I packed my Swiss Army knife and a bottle of chloroquine pills to suppress malaria. I decided not to bring my camera to avoid offending the Forest People but am starting to regret it. This may be my only chance to meet them. I think about my dad who, after serving in the Army, travelled overland from the jungles of Panama to the tip of South America. I can’t wait to tell him about my trip.

I imagine my dad doing his morning calisthenics before getting ready for work. He’s on the copper-colored rug in my parents’ bedroom, near the door. My mom sashays in, wearing a long satin bathrobe and slippers. She has a soft Southern accent and dark wavy hair that brushes against her shoulders. At twenty-three, while still a virgin, she married my dad and became a full-time Susie homemaker (literally – her name is Sue). She pulls one of his shirts from the sewing hamper by the nightstand, sits on the bed, and replaces a missing button while I get ready for the school bus.

As our little caravan continues south, the forest becomes denser and darker on both sides of the road. The sun slips below the treetops, and the headlights cast an eerie glow on the dense foliage, making creepy shadows. Soon, it is pitch black on all sides except for what we can see in the headlights. I can’t help but think of the gorillas, panthers, and snakes that live in the jungle. I am a young woman from suburbia, after all. My eyes are wide open, straining to see what lies ahead. We travel a few more kilometers until—*whoa!* – we come upon a massive tree that has fallen across the road. The tree is strangled in thick vines and has tangled roots that spread out in all directions. My heart leaps out of my throat, and I feel dizzy. *What the hell do we do now?*

Mariano says something to Laurent in Italian and honks the horn three times. The other vehicle stops, and everyone gets out to assess the situation.

“I’ll ask the men in the other truck to help us move the tree off of the road,” Mariano translates for me. We gather to look at the fallen tree, illuminated by headlights like a crime scene. Beyond the arc of the

headlights, there is nothing but blackness. The evening air is damp and smells like peat moss and wet ferns.

"We'll never be able to lift this tree," one of the men from the other truck says in French. "Let's see if we can roll it to the side of road." There is a flurry of talk, and the upshot is all the men agree. They spread themselves out on one side of the tree and push, groaning. The tree moves a few inches.

"Again," one of the men shouts. "On the count of three!" This time, they lean all their weight against the tree and roll it slowly, inch by inch, into a rut on the side of the road. We hear a satisfying thud as the tree tumbles in. A hum of approval rises.

"Well done," Mariano says, winded. The other men are bent over now, catching their breaths.

"Something bit me!" shouts a balding man whose face is etched with alarm. He slaps his leg vigorously.

"Eké!" another man yells, flinging something away from him.

"Good Lord!" Laurent says. "Something bit me too!" Laurent grabs a flashlight from the door of the truck and illuminates the ground where the tree had been.

"Army ants!" Laurent says. "We must be on top of an ant hill."

"Quick!" Mariano cries. "Crush them as fast as you can, then get back in the truck!"

A group of ants crawls up and over my hiking boots. Once inside my pants legs, they begin fanning out across my calves. I slap my calves as vigorously as I can, and the biting stops for a moment, but then it returns with even more intensity around my knees. I hear the sound of the men unbuckling their belts and see that Mariano and Laurent have pulled down their pants to attack the ants trapped inside.

"Mon Dieu!" Laurent shouts. "I keep finding more!" The number of army ants scaling my legs multiplies, leaving a winding trail of red-hot sores. This is no time for modesty. I unzip my pants, yank them down, and pummel the marauders as hard as I can until I've nearly crushed them. Some of them spring back to life, and I battle them one by one. Gasping for air, I lift my shirt in the glow of the headlights and smack the invaders crawling around my bra and torso. I feel the men's eyes as they turn and gape at me. My ears and cheeks burn.

Our ant-slapping frenzy continues until the smacking noises die down and Mariano calls everyone to get back in the trucks. As soon as I take my place, Mariano and Laurent slam the doors and we speed off. I can feel the throbbing of the blood pulsing in my ears, a concentrated rhythm of low-grade panic. Can people die from army ant bites? Have I been poisoned? I catch myself imagining my obituary: Volunteer succumbs to toxic army ants in remote African jungle.

No one speaks as we drive along the desolate road except for the occasional stifled shriek as one of us discovers another intrepid army ant trapped inside our clothing. By the time we reach our destination—a large open shelter with an elevated concrete floor and a corrugated tin roof—we have defeated the last stowaways, but I feel raw and tender. A small skirmish has been fought on my skin. I won in the end, but the damage was significant.

After unloading our gear from the trucks, the priests invite everyone in our convoy for a picnic dinner of sausage, cheese, and French bread. While sipping glasses of grappa to soothe our pain, the priests tell us about the shelter. It is the only permanent structure for miles around. As nomads, the Forest People live in temporary shelters made from branches covered by thick, waxy leaves, but they tend to stay within a two-mile radius. After we train the nomadic health care workers, they'll return to their neck of the woods and train others.

We say goodnight to each other, and as soon as I have a moment of privacy behind a row of stacked boxes, I reach for my first aid kit and train my flashlight on the small, raw patches of skin that have been attacked by the army ants. I clean them with an antiseptic solution and apply an antibiotic cream. There are at least a few dozen bites, but they look like they will scab over and heal, eventually. As I settle onto my sleeping mat away from the men, I debate whether to cover myself with a blanket from head to toe to protect myself from crawling insects, or to let the cool night air touch my burning skin. I end up pulling the blanket to my chin and breathe in the fresh, night air. With my eyes closed, I listen to the low, hoarse sound of frogs croaking. Crickets chirp, and an owl hoo-hoots in the distance.

The next morning, I wake up to the scratching sound of someone sweeping outside the shelter with a bundle of branches. The sweeper is talking in low guttural tones while scraping the branches over compacted earth. I will myself back to sleep, but a second voice chimes in, speaking the same unfamiliar language. From what I can gather, there are some recurring sounds like: na-ba, no, duh, nya, da, and buh. I feel a sudden lightness, like gossamer cloud floating in air. *These must be the Forest People!*

I reach for my favorite t-shirt with “Glad to be here!” and a drawing of a female rugby player on the front. The back of the shirt says in small letters, “Too bad it took 237 years. Ten years of women at Princeton.” I have yet to meet a Cameroonian who has heard of Princeton, and nobody seems particularly interested in woman power on this trip; but the phrase “Glad to be here!” lifts my spirits.

At first my dad didn't think it was worth sending his daughter to college the way he did his sons. My mom was exactly my age when she married my

dad, and they expected me to get married and start a family. My “education” included lessons in sewing, ballroom dancing, figure skating, and etiquette. I had to know proper table manners in case the Kennedys invited me to tea. I later learned that my dad’s mom convinced him to put me through school. “If you educate a girl, you educate a family,” she said. She’s my hero. Now my dad boasts about me graduating from Princeton with high honors—despite his low expectations.

The nutty, earthy aroma of coffee beckons, and I spot an aluminum coffee pot on a camping stove about thirty feet from the shelter. Laurent picks up an empty metal mug, raises it in my direction, and arches his eyebrow.

“That’s just what I need,” I say with a sigh of relief. I sip the coffee wordlessly as Laurent banters on about his Italian coffee pot and morning breakfast routine.

The health care workers start to arrive in small groups, and as they enter the clearing, they stop and look at me as if seeing an apparition. The Italian priests have been here before, but apparently, the Forest People have never seen a Western woman, let alone a woman with light brown hair and green eyes with gold and brown flecks. Some are so struck by my appearance that their jaws drop and stay open.

I try not to stare back but true to their reputation, they are small in stature. The average male appears to be around four and a half feet tall. They have roughly the same gentle walnut hue to their skin, cut from the same genetic cloth, with no intervening genomes. Their t-shirts are in various states of disrepair, from holy to damn near disintegrated. The men wear trousers held up by rope, and the women (about a quarter of the trainees) wear long pieces of cloth tied around their waists. As I turn away to get a notebook, I feel their eyes studying me intensely. I turn and smile but their faces are as emotionless as a thicket of tall grass.

As soon as the number of health care workers grows to a few dozen, the priests ask Alain, our translator, to announce the opening of the workshop. Alain appears to be in his late forties and wears studious, black-framed glasses that make him look like Malcolm X. He wears a wristwatch with a cracked face and a broken dial. The Forest People spread out on one side of the shelter and sit cross-legged on the cement floor. The smell of mud and earth abounds.

Père Laurent raises a Bible in the air, recites a prayer, and welcomes the health care workers to the workshop. The priests begin by reviewing one of the lessons from their previous visit on how to build a latrine. Then, the topic turns to water-borne diseases and how to protect a source of drinking water, like a well or a spring, from contamination. One of the priests points to an easel with a *boîte d’images* and turns the pages while the other speaks.



The trainees seem fascinated by the illustrations of bacteria, but first, a hand shoots up.

“Si?” Laurent asks. A trainee with a few missing teeth speaks in a low voice, and Alain translates.

“Please, Père Laurent, he wants to know why you have so much hair on your arms, and how you keep insects out of your beard.” The priests erupt in laughter.

“That’s how God made me,” Laurent says with a smile. “And I comb my beard.” The next illustration shows a microscope, and a youthful-looking trainee with a few whiskers sprouting from his chin asks how it works. The priests explain that microscopes have special lenses that allow us to see more than the human eye, but the trainees look perplexed. The shelter buzzes with conversation.

As the morning goes on, the shelter grows hotter and hotter, and I start to feel faint. The air is thick with the aromas of steaming earth and a rich blend of multinational body odor. The trainees begin to doze off as lunchtime approaches. Fortunately, the priests have brought food for everyone.

“We find the trainees learn better if we give them lunch,” Mariano says. I’d also train better if I had a little something in my stomach.

A few men from the other truck set up tables with stacks of tin plates and big metal bowls of starchy manioc that has been pounded, wrapped in banana leaves, and boiled to a soft, chewy pulp. There are big bowls of bitter leaf stew with smoked mackerel and roasted ground nuts. The trainees are eager to be fed but wait shyly until the plates of food are handed out. Once they have a plate and sit down, they scoop up the food with their fingers and wipe the plates clean with the boiled manioc. After lunch, we deposit our dirty plates into buckets of water guarded by jealous flies, and everyone rests under the shade of the trees until the heat subsides. While the others doze off, I swat mosquitoes away and watch for snakes. I don’t know what the snakes in this region look like, but I do know some are poisonous.

Now it is my turn to teach first aid and artificial respiration. I feel groggy after sitting on the warm ground, but my fear of speaking to the group injects me with a shot of useful adrenaline. Père Mariano opens the afternoon session with a prayer.

“Almighty God, we humbly thank you for bringing us here today, together in faith, so we may be better stewards of your creation and better servants of your Son, our Savior, Gesù Cristo. We ask you to bless us and guide us, in righteousness, so we may care for our fellow man, be learned from one another and live healthier and productive lives. Bless us, oh Lord, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

“Amen,” a few people say. Père Mariano introduces me and invites me

to begin the lesson. I can feel the trainees studying my every move and my face becomes flushed. I don't know what they find so interesting. Is it the outline of my bra under my t-shirt or the tiny hoop earrings I wear? Is it my teeth that have been straightened by years of visits to an orthodontist? Or my boots? The trainees do seem fascinated by my boots. I got them at Macy's, and while they're not going to win any fashion awards, they have sturdy rubber soles and protect my feet. The trainees are barefoot. (I can't help but wonder if they know any good remedies for army ant bites.)

To get their attention, I ask a series of questions about first aid.

"Let's talk about cuts. Can anyone tell me the first thing to do when someone is bleeding?" Total silence. I look at Alain for support, but he shrugs his shoulders. My hands begin to tremble.

"Ok." I say. "The first thing to do is elevate the wound. That helps slow the flow of blood to the wound. Does anyone know what comes next?" A hand goes up.

"Oui?" I ask. A man speaks, and the trainees howl with laughter. I take a deep breath.

"He wants to know if you have a husband," Alain says.

"No, I don't," I say quietly, faux chuckling. Meanwhile, my ears are burning. Is it noticeable, I wonder?

A second hand goes up.

"Yes?" I ask. Another man speaks, and the trainees' eyes open wide.

"He wants to know what's on your feet," Alain says.

"These are hiking boots," I say, taking a deep breath. "They protect my feet." I hold up one foot at a time so they can get a better look. The trainees murmur their approval. A young male trainee stands up and grins as he speaks. His two front teeth are normal, but his surrounding teeth have been filed down into ghoulish points.

"He wants to know if he can try them on," Alain says.

"Maybe later," I say, noncommittally, but there's a painful twinge in my stomach. Sharing my sweaty boots sounds gross. I need to change the subject – quickly.

I turn and point to the illustrations on the easel and talk about caring for cuts, minor burns, and stings. Then I show them illustrations of wounds that are clean and healing well versus others that have become infected. I pause after every sentence to give Alain time to translate. The trainees appear to be listening to the translation, but it is impossible to know how much is getting through. These are people who have lived in Cameroon for thousands of years, long before anyone else. It's pretty nerve of me to be lecturing them after being here only four weeks. They live in the rainforest with bats, army ants, snakes, and biting flies. They know how to treat wounds, I think, or they wouldn't have survived. I wonder if they think of

this as entertainment. I end the session with a lesson on caring for snake bites, but I feel certain they have antidotes to snake bites too.

While thanking everyone for their attention, I try not to show my embarrassment. It seems like only Alain was listening to me. Père Mariano closes the session with another prayer and an announcement about the training plan for the next day when I will be teaching artificial respiration and CPR. We wave goodbye to the trainees who fold into the trees and become invisible.

“Do you think they learned anything?” I ask the priests, after the trainees disperse.

“They seemed preoccupied with studying you,” Père Laurent says, winking at me.

“They probably learned something,” Père Mariano says, “but they need time to adjust to your voice and appearance.”

“It’s not like they have access to Western magazines or movies,” Père Laurent says with a smile.

The next day, the morning lesson by the priests seems to go quickly, and soon after lunch, it is my turn to teach. With Alain’s help, I explain the basics of checking for a heartbeat and giving rescue breaths.

“First, the person should be in a prone position, like this,” I say, pointing to a mannequin. “Then, check for a pulse, either at the wrist, like this, or at the carotid artery, like this.” I look around and see a look of concentration on their faces. My chest swells with excitement.

“Then, position your ear near the person’s nose and mouth so you can listen for signs of breathing, and look to see if the person’s chest is rising and falling.” I demonstrate this a few times.

“Next, with the person lying in a prone position, tilt the person’s head back while holding their chin down, like this. Their mouth should open on its own. Next, check to see if their airway is obstructed.”

Once it seems like everyone understands the instructions, I ask the trainees to form small groups so they can take turns practicing rescue breaths with a mannequin. It seems like a breakthrough when a trainee asks a question about the exercise, and I encourage others to ask questions. Then we move onto CPR. By the end of the session, a few of the trainees have overcome their shyness and smile at me.

After the workshop is over, the translator approaches me.

“The health care workers were happy with your class and asked if you can come back,” he says. The priests were also pleased with how the session went.

“Come over for pizza after we get back and we’ll celebrate!” Père Laurent says. Once Père Mariano chimes in and says he’ll be there, I accept.

Meanwhile, the trainees glide between the trees and vanish, without a trace.

REBECCA DIETRICH

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CREGG 6



DOUGLAS FRITOCK

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## LAST CALL

*"The former Mickey's Irish Saloon is getting a very different tenant:  
Rochester Cremation Services."*

*Post-Bulletin, April 17, 2014*

The crematorium  
where the husk of my father's body  
was permanently transformed  
into a few pints of ash—a *pint's*  
*a pound the world around*—  
was at one time an Irish pub  
with tufted leather booths,  
whiskey lining the walls,  
and a neon shamrock  
shining in the window.

I think of pentimento, that trace  
of something earlier  
subtly coming through,  
and wonder if any of the festive trappings  
of Mickey's neighborhood bar  
tinge the present sadness.  
Perhaps when the bellows  
of the furnace began to swell,  
a few notes of bagpipe music  
could be heard wafting through the venue.

KRISTIE FREDERICK DAUGHERTY

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## GODSPLAINING

*“When Jesus had lifted up himself, and saw none but the woman, he said unto her, Woman, where are those thine accusers? Hath no man condemned thee?”*

*John 8:10*

I watched as you cowered, the crook of your back,  
your hands covering your head.  
I saw the crowd clutching stones,  
coming for your heart and skull,  
ready to empty your eyes from their sockets,  
your nose to hollowness. I was late  
for supper and the day's miracles  
dripped from my fingers.

Your hair halted me. Wet from washing,  
shining, down to your waist.  
I foresaw the knots, the dirt,  
the fresh blood which would in minutes  
ruin it and forgive me—I wanted to hold it.  
I wanted no other man to sully it.

It's brought me here, to this white hot place.  
Why did I save you—(*do I desire?*),  
or was it only me looking out—  
what any decent person would have done?  
I think about this often, when the crowds have gone.  
I hold my left hand in my right: still nothing.

For whom did I save you?  
I won't be here to stop the hands  
of men who will continue to take  
and grab from you in the night,  
then come by day with hands  
of stone, heaving heavy weights.

You carry the burden alone:  
as woman is, alone.  
Like when my father created Eve.  
He could have done it  
without the boy rib.  
He could have given womankind wings,  
slight wings, to flutter above  
sticks and rocks and things that hurt.

## LAST RITES

The clicks and the beeps and the dings are absorbed into the carpeted walls and low ceiling. My eyes, still smarting from the bright sun outside, are soothed by the dim halogen lights. My ears are assaulted, though. Aren't churches supposed to be quiet? The thought rattles around in my head until it comes to rest.

This is my church. This is my cemetery.

The altar of the pinballs. The collection plates of metal tokens. Prayers are uttered by the congregation as they stare into the digital afterlife. My hands twitch with muscle memory.

As a teenager these holy relics saved my soul.

"Comun, comun, comun," the boy beside me repeats to himself and his computational, fractional deity. His unwashed hair has caused his forehead to break out. He whips his head to keep it out of his eyes, his hands dancing across the series of sticks and buttons he plays like an impassioned pianist.

An anguished groan escapes his mouth as his legs give way under him. He sags to the ground; defeat is cruel, I think. I move to catch him before he bounds back up wildly, speaking in demonic tongue. He slaps the plastic of the console, and the pixels jump on the screen. I jump. He turns and walks away, limbs tight and contracted.

I root my feet to the ground and breathe in the stale spilled beer, body odor, and cheap CK One cologne. Or was it Drakkar Noir; splashed on like holy water?

Forehead, chest, shoulder, shoulder.

This is where I'd come to escape death. The death that had come for my father. The death that he wallowed in before giving himself up to it. I loathed that sweet, sickly smell of the hospice room that encompassed my dying father's last days, preferring the smells, sounds, and sensations of the arcade. It was an escape from everything: school, my therapist's office, the ranch-style home where I lived in constant disputes with my stepmother, every utterance out of her mouth the beginning of an adolescent argument.

"You smell like cigarettes."

"You have to at least try to do your homework or you're going to fail."

"You need to come home right after school."

"You need to visit your father before it's too late. You're going to regret not seeing him. He doesn't have much time left."

Her pleas accessorized with a broken sob until they were eventually replaced with a tired face and numbed voice. I still didn't acquiesce.



I smoked all the cigarettes. I failed freshman algebra. I went straight to the arcade.

It felt alive to me, so I had exiled myself from his bedside to the electronic battleground where death was only momentary and life cost just another coin. Death didn't seem real. Didn't seem permanent. Didn't seem that big of a deal.

When I learned my father had died, peacefully, doped up with painkillers and sedatives, I had refused to leave the arcade until the coroner had taken his body to the morgue. I was late to his funeral because I had one more level to win before placing my initials on the leaderboard.

D-A-D

He has been immortalized in this maligned machine for the past 14 years, beseeched and exalted by each soul who lost their own life, albeit digital. Is it the same? Is it different?

I place my hands on the console reverently. I close my eyes. I pay my respects.

Father. Son. Holy Ghost.

[PR] Fall 2024

BREANNA CEE MARTINS

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## A FRANTIC BEATING OF THE HEART IN THE CHEST



MICHAEL GOODWIN HILTON

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## HER ROOM

### *Characters*

TOM: young man, successful author.

ROSE: his sister, suffers from mental illness and past trauma.

MOVER: young man from a moving company.

### *Setting*

The screened porch of a lake house in the Deep South.

### *Time*

The present.

*“Ambiguity or complexity of character is what we must first accept in anyone whom we care for in our complex and ambiguous fashion [...] seeing [our] confusing loved ones, in life or in manuscript, as weathers or climates in a continual equinox, with flashes of beautiful color and torrents of darkness.”*

*—Tennessee Williams, “The Agent as Catalyst”*

*For my grandmother, Lucy.*

*(Scene: a screened porch of an old lake house. TOM, the older sibling, escorts his sister, ROSE, onto a sofa downstage. He treats her as delicately as one would a most fragile possession. The sun has set and the light is fading, but still robust and hypnotic onstage.)*

TOM: It won't break.

ROSE (*distantly*) What?

TOM: The sofa. It won't break. I've had it repaired.

ROSE: Oh.

TOM: You can put as much weight on it as you like.

ROSE: All right.

TOM: You can lie down on it.

ROSE: Yes.

TOM: Rose.

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*(ROSE turns toward her brother ever so slightly.)*

TOM: I want you to be comfortable.

ROSE: I'm all right.

TOM: Can I get you anything? (She doesn't respond. TOM sits on the sofa beside her, looks out at the lake.) I wanted to make sure you came out in time to see it.

ROSE: It?

TOM: The sunset.

ROSE: Oh.

TOM: Can you see the colors? The way the light reflects off the lake? And the clouds. Where else in the world could you see light like that except in the South? Where else?

(ROSE doesn't respond and TOM doesn't seem to expect her to. Moments pass.)

ROSE: I'm tired.

TOM: Please, lie down.

ROSE: I want to rest, Tom. Inside. (She starts to get up.)

TOM: No, Rose, wait, stay here.

ROSE: I want to go back upstairs.

TOM: You can't.

ROSE: Why?

TOM: You just can't. Not yet.

ROSE: When?

(TOM looks back at the sky, the lake.)

TOM: "Flashes of beautiful color, torrents of darkness."

ROSE: What did you say?

TOM: It's the title of my new play. Do you like it?

ROSE: I don't know. It sounds...

TOM: What? What does it sound like?

ROSE: An echo.

(Moments pass.)

TOM: Do you remember when we came here as children? How we'd splash around beneath the dock. Pretend to be divers or sea creatures or battle-

weary officers, or anything else we dreamed up. Do you remember?

*(ROSE doesn't answer.)*

You were always the better storyteller. By the time I came up with the plot for our adventure, you had already started on the next one. You were always ten steps ahead of me. I've been racing my whole life to keep up with your imagination.

*(He turns to her.)*

"Flashes of beautiful color, torrents of darkness." Do those words mean anything to you, Rose?

*(She appears to briefly consider, but turns her gaze to the floor instead.)*

That was how you described the sunset, just like the one we're seeing now. All those years ago, when it was just you and me down at the dock. You used those words and they never left me. They never left me, Rose. Nothing you said has ever left me. Even though I left you.

*(Pause. ROSE looks at him briefly, then out toward the lake.)*

I should have stayed. I wish I'd stayed when you began having fits instead of leaving. If I'd tried to intervene, to keep them from sending you off to that place. To those butchers. Those crackpots. Who reached their filthy, ignorant hands into that blossoming brain of yours, and tore off every petal. Every single one. Oh Rose. Why didn't I stop them from sending you to that God-forsaken hospital? Why didn't I stay and fight? Why? Can you ever forgive me?

ROSE *(seeming confused)* I...I...

TOM: Rose, forgive me for leaving! Forgive me for letting them take you away like that.

ROSE: I want to lie down.

TOM: Rose....

ROSE *(becoming agitated)* I want to go upstairs to my room and rest!

TOM: You can't.

ROSE: Why not?

TOM: It's not there anymore.

ROSE *(getting to her feet, newly alert)* I'm going to my room now.

TOM: It's being cleared out.

ROSE: By who?

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*(TOM doesn't answer.)*

Who's clearing my room? Are they from the hospital?

TOM: No.

ROSE: I won't let them take me back. They'll never take me back!

TOM: They won't.

ROSE: I'll never go back there! Never! They'll never get me on their operating table ever again!

TOM: There's no need to worry about that anymore.

ROSE: How can you be so sure?

TOM: Because Rose...you're no longer alive.

*(Extended beat. ROSE sits back down and turns her gaze downward once more.)*

TOM: This is all that I have left of you. The memory of how you looked the evening before...

ROSE: Before?

TOM: Before you drowned yourself in the lake. *(Pause)* They said that you likely got dizzy at the end of the dock and lost your balance. Something to do with the new medication. But I know the truth. I knew it then and I know it now. You couldn't stand it any longer, could you Rose?

ROSE *(after a moment)* The dock.

TOM: Yes, what about it?

ROSE: It's disappearing, isn't it?

TOM: What do you mean?

ROSE: The planks are rotted through. The pilings are crooked. The whole thing is sure to break down and drift apart any moment. Just float away, piece by piece. And each one will wash up on a separate shore, and no one who finds those pieces will have any idea what they belonged to, what they upheld, what they once kept together. They'll have no idea of the weight they all bore, for so long, so many years. Everything they supported. Every laugh, every romp, every wish, every sigh, every curse. Every short word and long thought. Every dream. Every story.

TOM: It's still there, Rose. The dock. I can see it.

ROSE: No it's not.

*(A young man enters the porch from the house. He knocks tentatively.)*

MOVER: Excuse me.

*(TOM stands abruptly.)*

TOM: Is everything all right?

MOVER: I didn't mean to disturb you.

TOM: Is everything finished? Is all the furniture moved out?

MOVER: We've finished the upstairs.

TOM: And her room?

MOVER: Empty. *(slight pause)* We're closing up the truck now.

TOM: Fine. I'll be there shortly.

MOVER: Sorry, I...I shouldn't say....

TOM: What's wrong?

MOVER: It's just...your books. And plays, and the films they made from them. They mean a lot to me.

TOM: Thank you.

MOVER: They've really helped me over the years. In ways I can't really explain.

TOM: That's very kind.

MOVER: I'm not saying that 'cause I want a big tip or anything.

TOM: I made no such assumption.

MOVER: I just thought you might like to know...your books were there for me. When it felt like nothing else was or could be. They were there. *(Beat.)* I'll let you know once we're ready.

*(The man exits. TOM looks back at the lake for several beats before sitting down once more beside ROSE.)*

TOM: It's all yours, Rose. Everything I've ever written. Every single word belongs to you.

ROSE *(in a reverie)* "...life...as weathers or climates in a continual equinox, with flashes of beautiful color and torrents of darkness."

TOM: Yes, Rose, do you remember? You said that. They're all yours —all of it —every single —!

ROSE *(looks at him directly)* No, it's not true. I didn't say them. You did.

TOM: But...

ROSE: You did, Tom, you did. And now it's time to tell a different story. Perhaps a better one.

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TOM (*dejected, uncertain*) But how?

(*ROSE puts her hand to her brother's face.*)

ROSE: Darling. You always knew the right things to say.

(*TOM and ROSE look together once more at the lake, over the audience, into the sun disappearing. Lights slowly fade.*)

*END PLAY*



BREANNA CEE MARTINS

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## WITHERING HEIGHTS



KRIS GREEN

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## THAT FAR AWAY LOOK

To: Rosalia  
From: Peter  
Subject: Valediction

Ros,

I waited until you were in Italy before sending this. Perhaps the timing was right only by the grace of the moons and vicious fates allowing my one last mercy. By the time you read this, I will be dead.

Remember when we were in medical school, and we had our first autopsies? This was before I decided on what avenue of medicine to follow. You knew then, you wanted to help kids. You always knew, didn't you?

Our cadaver had open eyes when we opened the bag. We kept our composure as budding new doctors, but the smell had made us both wince. Do you remember we talked about it that night over cheap tequila on the rooftop of the Jefferson building? That far-away look our cadaver had. As if they were looking out at the distant shores of a faraway world to places we could not travel without getting our ticket punched for the next stop.

Then you said it. I remember it vividly, but I don't know if we ever talked about it after. You said, they looked afraid. It was as if maybe those distant shores weren't inviting but tribal lands to which we were unwelcomed strangers. Then I joked what if.... they.... saw.... death coming? Do you remember? It was a long time ago, but we were holding hands by the time we were done talking. It was the first of many intimacies. It was also the night I decided I wanted to work with the dead.

I've been seeing the shadow people for a long time now.

I tried telling Emma once before we got married. Well, we know how long Emma lasted—haha. Well, we were standing watching the sunset. I saw what I thought were clouds or something moving violently in the distance. Dark shadows moving across the horizon—harbingers of those distant lands? Maybe. At the time, I wasn't so sure.

It's been a while since Emma. A lot has happened, but I still saw those shadows moving. Out of the corner of my eye, I would see movement. Then I would turn. Nothing. It was like a cruel childhood game.

Until I learned to see. Turning is not how you do, it's more complicated. Your other senses need to be engaged. Then a dark flash of wings, scaly creatures with dark foreboding eyes flying around.

It's tempting to say I'm losing it. But I don't think so. Why would it not

be possible to believe that someone who's seen that faraway look cannot recognize it in themselves briefly in the mirror? Why would someone not see that maybe if he too were headed for those distant shores, those tribal savages would be as curious of him as he is of them?

They followed Sarah a lot when we were dating. I never mentioned it. Fear of what people would think has kept a lot of insane people in sane company. We were watching a movie when they wrapped around her. It looked like they were trying to make love to her. I lost track of the movie watching them, the shadow people, wrapping around her. They were weaving in and out—as if becoming one with her.

I know now what it meant—waking up next to her cold body the next morning. I had told people of the shock, but I now know I should've seen it coming.

As I type this, I see my hand being held by theirs. There's more. Oh Ros, if I had the time, I'd tell you it all. I should've told you. There's so much. The woman on my table this morning. The man at the store last week—I see it all now. We are the tribal savages. It's too late.

I don't know when it started. Oh Ros, maybe it's because I'm with the dead all week or maybe.... Well, there's no time. I can't let this drift into drafts. I have to send it.

I'm sorry. I've always loved you even though we both have been married to others. You're my closest friend.

If you see the shadows... well, look for me.

P

DAN HECK

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## GRIEF LIKE WAVES

**I**t's a calm day. The ship barely sways. Waves will come to rock me though, like they always do.

I scrub a day's worth of grease and grime off a still hot griddle. It's Spring 2009. I've been in the Coast Guard for a year now. I'm in the middle of my first patrol. In the middle of nowhere. Black bubbles of gunk rise and pop, rise and pop, from cold water I poured. You're not supposed to clean a griddle this way. I've heard that the sudden change in temperature can cause the slab to crack. But it makes my life easier, so I take the risk.

A year ago my dad died. I haven't thought about his death in several weeks. I've been happy for about as long.

Through the steam wall in front of me, I see my supervisor, and his supervisor walking towards me. Fuck. They're going to see the steam and the pitcher of cold water and know what I've done. Several weeks ago, my supervisor was in a mood and decided to check us cooks out before we would call it a night. Nothing met his white glove check. Everything was cleaned again. Instead of finishing at 7PM, for a breezy 14-hour day, we got off at 11PM for a grueling 18-hour day. We stunk of onion-musk, and degreaser. I used my exhaustion as an excuse to not check my emails from home before bed. That same excuse has been used every day since, regardless of when I got off. If anyone wants to talk to me, I don't know it. If I have anything to say to someone, I suppress it. My supervisor stands two feet in front of me and I wince knowing he knows what I've done to the griddle, even though he only sees the covered back.

My supervisor pauses, so I pause too.

"I need you to stop what you're doing and come with us."

I must be shock-pale, because he says, "You're not in trouble. Just follow me."

I walk behind my supervisor and his supervisor. I prepare for the chief's mess deck where I'll take my lashes, but instead we walk to a higher level of the cutter where the air is cleaner. Serene. We don't stop until we're in the stateroom of the warrant officer in charge of my division. It's not like my barracks. There are no cramped coffin racks. No mystery odors. No noise from chatter and exhausted sighs that don't let up until we're home. Instead, there's one bed and a desk with a private bathroom. Here, life is still.

"Your mother contacted us through the Red Cross. Your grandfather died."

I'm still.

"You're too important for our mission to go home for his funeral, but you can use my satellite phone to call your mom," the warrant officer says.

I'm given three minutes to talk to my mom while two relative strangers stare at me. Not much is said. Even if two people weren't eyeing me down, I wouldn't have said much. I now see how hard it is to find words to comfort someone after they've lost a parent. Her silence a year ago, after my dad—makes sense.

Before I retreat from my supervisor's supervisor's stateroom to hide in my dark rack, I'm told I have night baking duty. In about two hours I'll have to bake from eight to midnight.

"That's fine. I need a distraction," I lie.

I want to escape to the fantail of the cutter with a cold glass of something sweet and a pack of Camel Crush cigarettes. Where the night sky blankets me. A pool of infinity, reflecting above the waters that push and pull this vessel, rippling with gravity yet somehow untethered to the ambush of forces pushing and pulling downwards. But the stars will remind me of my grandfather, the scientist that showed me my first lunar eclipse, comet, and constellations. Unblinking guides in the sky, charted for me by his wisdom. But a stargazer's time is finite. And the light eventually spills from his eyes.

The ocean picks up around us, so I scurry back with care to my coffin rack. The poor excuse for a bed at least has a tiny privacy curtain to shroud me. Inside it, I try not to cry as I'm rocked in the darkness. I need comfort, but there's nothing except for my iPod mini. I hit shuffle and let the music play. For a moment I'm fine, but grief is never one and done. It comes in waves to pull me down.

The waves are now unavoidable and I have to lay on my back to not roll away. A random song comes on about loss and I replay the call with my mom. This time I say the things I should've said to let her know I love her and care about her pain. In return she says all the things I wish she had said to help comfort me with the loss of my dad.

Her phantom words buoy me as I'm rocked by wave after wave. I never drown.

MATT THOMAS

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## WHILE ON LEAVE

Your breath catching as the car lurched  
and stalled.  
The pedals fat and cool  
beneath your bare feet.  
The ball of the shifter snug in your palm  
and his hand warm on top of yours  
while the gnarled hickories spun  
across the bug-stained windshield.  
He moved your hand through the gears,  
*brother,*  
the bones  
of his skinny arm against your own  
as you leaned on the tightly closed mouth of each gear  
until it yielded deliciously slow,  
the grease still morning-cold  
and thick.

Now he is instructing you,  
holding his cigarette out the window with one hand and  
gesturing inside of the car with his other.  
You toss your head as you listen, then  
push your hair back behind your ears with both hands,  
dragging your fingers slowly down to your jawbone.  
This is your habit.

There's a bee on the window sill.  
And off somewhere a Catbird is cawing.  
You wish that you could daydream things  
in the here and now  
instead of stuff gone off, ashed  
from the day drawn down  
into your own, retreating, wake.

JACQUELINE SCHAAALJE

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## A WOMAN

Bones and brain pull in tandem  
to run the puppet show of muscles and sinews.  
Tanned flesh and shawls pay the ransom  
so her covetable years continue.

Two legs, two children, and she's inside-out.  
I'm her gorgeous copy, colour my own carbon.  
Where do motives go when they're psyched out?  
The excess of her regrets bloom my organs.

A water ring on the table ticks off her compass.  
A vacuum cleaner whines her anguish.  
I sit in that spotless brightness.  
Malice slips in her rag if I languish.

She hovers around my candle, always wakeful;  
A step in rage, a claw in desire.  
It's skin control, she expects me to be grateful.  
I'm pulled in two, a kind of torture.

The snakes in my tongue plot my escape  
in letters and new friends. Before my bedtime,  
she sips her rosé wine. She tries to reshape  
the humiliating blots on her lifeline.

Her weakening brings us closer, I discover  
that helping her develops our friendship.  
One time at least she's glad that I'm her daughter  
when she breaks her hip, her spent lips.

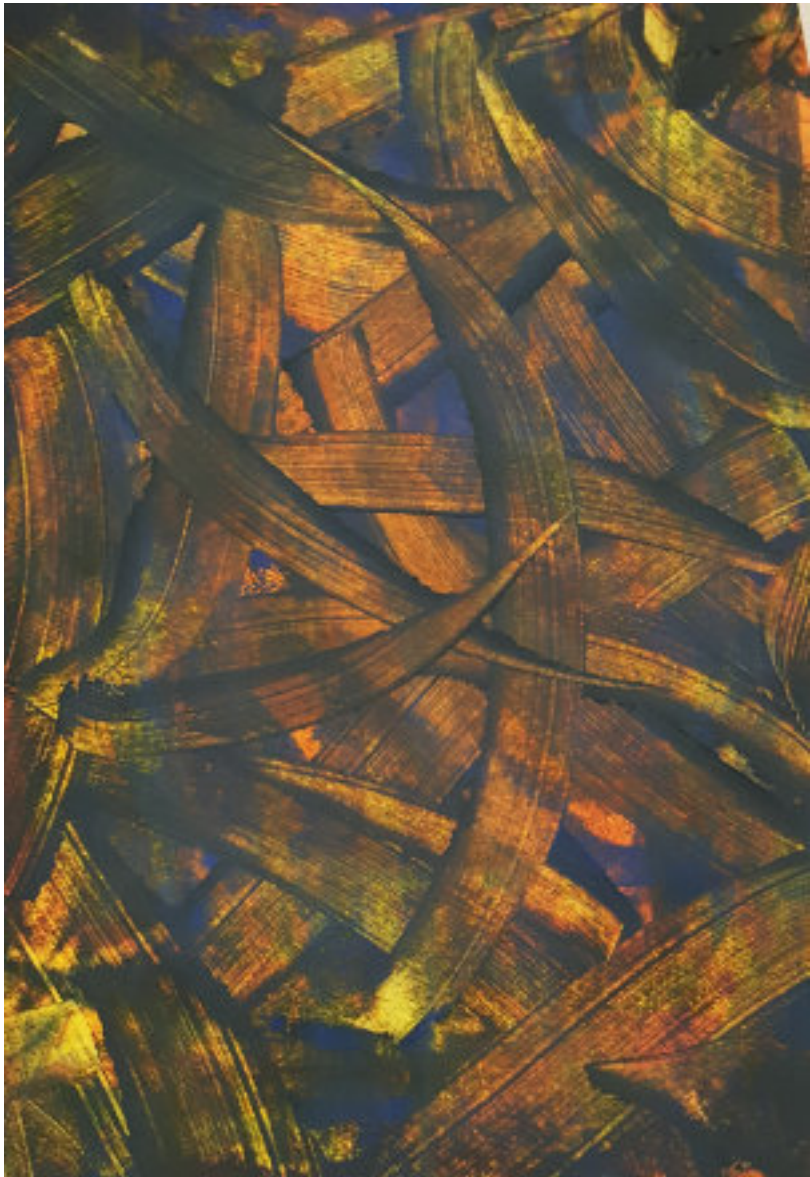
She kept me longer alive than the pharaoh.  
That she defies her sickness draws praise.  
Close to the town, in the flooded banks of sorrow  
I root in clay, scribble on her grave.

I drift here and there, and face the ocean:  
a clearness filtered by sunlight  
so clear, I can't see the ground of my emotions.  
I keep some money as my birthright.

ELLEN JUNE WRIGHT

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WATERCOLOR NO. 3816





ELIZABETH JOEL

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## SONDER

There is a place I like to go where the edge of the world meets the abyss. Here I can imagine reality as I wish, not as it once was. The chatter becomes hollow; mouths move but no sound can be heard over the rushing waters. Late season tourists mill about, digging their toes into rock-strewn sand, unaccustomed to the roughness that lances their feet. I blend myself into the background, aligning my body with the horizon to serve no other purpose than invisibility. They cannot see me for what I am if I do not exist, if I am but a hologram refracted from their minds; a projection of their idea of me.

A family of four comes into view as I settle onto the bench eroded from sunlight and saltwater. A couple, I presume, the woman much older than the man. I watch her lips move as the words are lost to the breeze that whips at her ankles and unveils a stretch of intimate skin surely only he is meant to see. Unnoticed, she continues down to the edge of the surf, palming a handful of seashells and pocketing the most beautiful. The man whispers something into her ear, the shell of his own hand blocking out the unwanted noise. Her face goes slack as her palm opens and scatters the remnants of the ocean's discarded treasures.

How did they meet? I wonder. On this very beach where so many bodies have been admired? Or perhaps the streets of the city made their home, one a voyeur on a fire escape longing for the other across an alleyway, although which did what I do not know. When did their love begin and when was it lost? Hand in hand, they walk away, taking with them a story I know will finish elsewhere.

I have collected so many strangers that I have lost track of whose life I am living, theirs or mine. Feeling my body waver in reality, I place my hand on my neck, feeling the beat just to be sure. My fingers meet the raised skin of a childhood scar long forgotten. I never listened to my mother about the poison ivy hidden in the field, nor did I heed her warning on my wedding day where a different kind of venom stood at the altar, waiting. I question how many women have the same scars, how many men have provided them. I hide mine well under a cloak of baggy jeans and oversized sweaters, under the layers that have healed, making me a liar of my own making. If you are told something enough times, you would be a fool not to believe it.

And so I sit, I melt, I waver. I wait for the next face that could be my own, one that will assure me this story is not mine, but ours. We are but characters in a world made of paper, words that repeat and take shape anew.

CARA LORELLO

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## TIME STITCH OF PRESENT AND FUTURE

Summer Sunday eve I observed  
at an outdoor concert the last receding  
glow from a red penny sun between  
the webbed Pavilion shades strobing  
their iridescent blues and whites toward  
the west.

I counted the seconds as it watered down  
to a faint rose tinge laced with nighttime  
indigo, and in the periphery, a duo of fangirls  
tossing tanned limbs and long hair in near-  
perfect sync to every verse sung.

This time next week, will observe these same  
skies at nightfall in Las Vegas as witness  
to a friend's vows to another while our shared  
singleness lives its last moments, just another  
thing gone in seconds to the tune of music,  
raised voices, the air and light changing  
right before you.

I am but one in a sea of eyes before this show  
under the sun, everything it touches passed by  
like hourglass sands, too few at a time leaving  
the fine imprint of lasting memory.

JOSEPH CONRAD PAYNE

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## SLOW VIOLENCE

A personal injury lawyer stays late at the office to have sex with her paralegal. She is a mother, forty-one years old, at the firm for ten years now. And his age—well, she can't remember. She is in her car now. She jumps at the sound of the door shutting, the one she herself shut. Her hands on the steering wheels, the chip in her red fingernail. A bit old for his position, she reminds herself. The paralegal. The way his eyes crinkle when he smiles—perhaps a later start in life.

She puts her forehead on her steering wheel and takes a deep breath: this is her first time having sex with someone who is not her husband since getting married sixteen years ago. Her grip tightens on the wheel, like her nails in his back, so hard and muscled. She takes a deep, shuddering breath. There are tremors in her body, but they are subsiding; her grip slackens.

She wonders if this is the last time this will happen.

Back to business: she flips down the mirror. She pulls her hair back into a tight bun. She inspects the hand-mark across her cheek. She shifts her jaw around and is certain it will not bruise and that, indeed, it will fade. She places her glasses back on her face. She notices the crow's feet around her eyes. She likes to think that, given her profession, this lends her a certain sense of dignity, one that might be sexualized. Neither her husband nor her most recent sexual partner have validated this—he covered her face and mouth. This made her come. This made him come.

She wipes the lipstick from her mouth. It had been made a mess, a red smear. She fishes the same tube of lipstick out of the console and re-applies it and it is shiny and red and wet. Thoughtlessly, she tosses the tissue to the passenger seat, where it slips between door and seat. She has a lot on her mind. Later, her husband will find it. He will think that she had a bloody nose.

Finally, she flicks the mirror back down. She notices that there are many stars in the night sky. She does not need to remind herself that this is beautiful. Uncommonly for her, she sits in this moment. She takes it in: the heat still rolling off her body, the cold, prickled sky beyond. But then she reminds herself it is nothing she has not seen before.

She drives home.

She lives in a nice neighborhood in a nice house. She has neighbors and a small, quiet lawn with sprinklers. Framing her front door are faux pillars. She is in the driveway now. The car is still running and the clock says that it

is 9:57pm. In her lap she has an open basket of Chinese takeout. She is looking at the house. There are too many lights on, and in two windows, flickers of blue. A common sight. The sprinklers are still going. They should have been turned off when her husband got home at 4:30pm. The grass is very green, very tall, and getting unruly. She will have to mow this weekend. She sits in her car a while longer.

She continues to eat.

She is waiting for some thought to come to her, something important and clarifying, because she feels like that is what should happen right now. Because she feels as though she is seeing things with clarity. Looking at her house dead-on like this, she remembers the childhood thought that lit houses at night looked like they had faces. Monstrous, anguished faces with many holes in them. Orifices. And when you flick the switch, you close them up.

She realizes that it's not going to get better. She takes her Chinese and her purse and her heels click on the pavement. She walks by the sprinklers and doesn't turn them off. One of them flicks harshly, gets some water on her ankles. It is disappointingly cool.

The foyer is a brightly lit cacophony of fake-gilded picture frames dedicated to her small family. By chance, one catches her eye. It is a photograph of her son in a soccer jersey. He is flanked by her and her husband. Both of them look younger. Her husband is very tall and handsome and lean, his hair blonde and wavy. It has not yet begun to gray. She looks at her son. He is sixteen now but she does not remember what the year the picture was taken. He could not be older than ten and he is holding a trophy. They were all given trophies at the end of the season. Vividly she remembers driving him home and, cradling that trophy, her son said he didn't want to play soccer again. She asked him why.

I hate it, he said.

She looked at him in the rearview mirror. The smooth flesh around her eyes just beginning to crack. Then her husband said, Well, that's too bad.

On the picture, she places a hand over her husband's face. She looks at herself. She looks at her son. She wonders what one is supposed to see in this image, what she had hoped she'd see in this picture, years later.

She reaches the end of the hall and she flicks off the light.

She walks into the dining room and it is empty. She flicks off the light.

In the living room there is the flickering blue of the television screen. She walks in there and sees that a police procedural is playing. There are two cops interrogating a woman. The police are doing a good job. The woman is crying.

On the couch her husband is dead asleep. It appears he barely changed

from his work clothes as his neat, pressed pants are still on and he is in shirtsleeves, the cuffs rolled up. Protruding from the unbuttoned bottom of the shirt is a sizeable, hairy belly. He is snoring loudly and, looking at the stubble growing on his face, she wrinkles her nose. He is in need of a shave. She also knows that he was likely drinking tonight, at least since he got home, as this particular mode of dishevelment is characteristic of a sort of performative, alcoholic apathy that is a simple manifestation of his sober apathy. This is a thing that she knows. But because there are no bottles, no smells, no yelling, and no tears, she is inclined—or normally would be inclined—to simply focus on the fact that he is in need of a shave. She toys with these two thoughts but instead, ultimately, focuses on his bulging stomach. She realizes, with some degree of disgust, that although he did not take the time to change clothes, he did have to take the time to unbutton the last few buttons of his shirt. She watches the mass of his stomach rise, the hairs tangling within themselves.

The stomach on top of her tonight was so flat, so clean. She remembers trying to scream. She couldn't.

She decides that he needs a shave and switches off the television.

She checks the fridge in the kitchen next. There are scraps of cooked steak on a plate in the fridge, covered poorly in plastic wrap. There is also a huge bowl of leftover salad, nearly three-quarters full, that she remembers making over the weekend. The salad is to be for her, she assumes; she is certain her husband will eat the steak tomorrow. Absently, she finishes off her Chinese and sets the box aside. She takes the steak out, opens a drawer and takes some Tupperware out, and with her bare hands shifts the steak to the Tupperware and puts it in the fridge. She puts the plate by the sink by a pile of unwashed dishes. She turns on the water and rolls her sleeves up, but then stops. The running tap, the clink of a shifting plate. She turns the water off and it drips. Then she turns off the light in the kitchen.

The final light in the house is her son's room. The door is cracked and light is spilling out. Inside there are the sounds of intense violence. Quietly, she opens the door. Her son is sitting on the edge of his bed, playing a video game. He is playing a game in which he is a man holding a gun and, looking out the eyes of this man, he is shooting other men holding guns. It is battle for survival, she imagines. They are made to look like they are in a desert, some run-down foreign town, the sort of place that gets blown up in movies.

She flicks his light off. The violence more clear, more lurid, for it. Her son—for the only time tonight—turns around and sees her standing in the blue glow of the dark. Hi, mom, he says.

She smiles. How was your day?

Good.

Any homework?

No.

Since you've got nothing better to do, you'll do the dishes when you get home tomorrow, right?

Sure.

On screen, the gun is swept aside, and a knife appears. It lodges in another man's throat. Blood bubbles. But, curiously to her, numbers pop up on the screen near the dead man. She waits for a moment, watches as a group of men shout and try to run away from an explosive thrown by her son. The men fail. Vaguely, she wonders if her son is aware that she can see the plain violence he is enacting—if he thinks that, because of her age, because she is a mother, she does not understand the images before her.

She lingers in the doorway longer than usual. Then she asks how his father was tonight.

Good, says her son. He shoots another man. The man dies, and her son steps over him.

This, suddenly, makes her viscerally angry. Are you listening to me? she has raised her voice.

He doesn't notice. Yes, he says.

She slaps her hand on the wall. Perfectly timed with another explosion; her son doesn't look up. Her face is red, like it must have been tonight, in the office. Just like then, no one will see it.

A gun shudders and cracks. A soldier's head, like a watermelon, explodes. A body with no head writhing. The numbers pop up on the screen again. She does realize that she doesn't understand.

Can you stop that, just for a moment? she asks.

Her son doesn't look at her. Not right now, he says.

J G ORUDJEV

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## THE ROSE FLOOR



CAMERA WOMAN: LETTERS HOME

I.

Father, after you fell that November      you needed constant care.

Mother threw herself

willingly

into that slavery:

ordered wheelchair      hospital bed      gauze

oxygen—

determined to anchor you

to this world.

You were already      on the borderland

of your new (ancient) home.      Your spirit was

beat

like the buffalo I filmed      in Indonesia      I named Henry

the one who died slowly      from the Komodo bite.

I wanted to comfort Henry

be his mother      lather his wounds.

Henry watched me watch him die.

I could not reach out to him

could not save him.



When I think of you

I return to Henry

to that buffalo

to be with him

as he sloshed his

heavy head

in the mud.

I tell myself, tell the buffalo:

*I will break all the rules this time, Henry.*

*I will get down in the muddy sludge with you.*

*I will look you in the eye while you tell me your story.*

*I will tell you mine, so we both know we are not alone.*

## II.

Father, the postman stops by once a week. Delivers

“No post today,” voice bereft, hefted:

a dirge. He asks about new footage.

I show him stills of sea turtles, point out the one whose shell

had grown so barnacled we called Fish and Wildlife. We laugh

at how the turtles look like just turtles in my shots

but in my cameraman’s they’re like schoolchildren posing

for class photos: clean jacket shells, wide-eyed, wonder-fed.

Before the postman leaves he pulls a crushed cigarette

from his shirt pocket. I see you again on your back porch

with your pack of Winstons. I try to keep him with me long as possible.

I tell him about the languages you and I spoke:

Fried spam birthday breakfast; Larry Bird against Dr J.; swimming lessons

where you held the back of my shirt above water

as I dove into waves: your hands my lifejacket.

It seems such a secret to tell this stranger, but I profess

how I miss your freckled arms, your barnacled hands.

I tell him the day you pulled me back from drowning

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your panic tattooed a bruise on my shoulder. You confessed  
you would have done anything to save me.

I give the postman my own confession: how I didn't know

that hard day decades later was to be your last.

How I was hurt by something you said to me while the fibrosis  
in your lungs was suffocating you. How it cost precious breath

to ask, "Are you leaving?" and "You came back?" How I refused  
to answer. How the morphine I dropped into your mouth  
was all I could do to save you.

ROHAN BUETTEL

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## GLACIER

As the climate warms  
I return to the recessional,  
leave paternoster lakes,  
my maximum advance  
marked in the landscape  
by a terminal moraine.  
The ablation zone extends  
and I melt, sublimate,  
evaporate and calve.  
I remember my youth,  
the active push and thrust,  
the counter-blocking  
and shearing of sediment,  
scoring bed-rock,  
plucking and shattering  
the lee slopes of nunataks,  
extending and taking pride  
in my growing length.  
Diminishing now, I am ice,  
hard, high-pressured,  
slow-moving but inexorable.  
I carry the remnants  
of smashed rock within,  
still scoring the bedrock  
with its fragments  
and depositing the till  
at the sides or the end.  
The braided stream  
of an outwash fan  
carries my meltwater.  
I leave kettle and kame:  
kettle holes in the  
outwash plain;  
kame mounds  
of gravel or sand  
deposited on the ground.  
And when I'm gone,  
there's nothing left  
but the marks I've made  
on the world.

JOHN DAVIS

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## BRING ON THE RAIN

March, 1953. I am not born.  
Rain all day all night. Box bush  
holds the mud, cold roots  
have yet to stir. My father,

home from adding tax figures  
with a slide rule, carries his briefcase  
up the rain-soaked steps,  
waves to me in my mother.

In minutes my parents will touch tongues.  
He will pat me. I will kick  
a hello. She will smoke a Salem  
not knowing she will die

from lung cancer in fifty years.  
He will fix a snort of scotch  
and soda not knowing his brain  
will give way to dementia

and he will forget my name  
which is his name. They hug  
a hold, smell the meatloaf  
slathered with ketchup and onions

on the bubbling meat. The faucet  
drips. The furnace clunks. My sisters  
slam doors, scream their lungs,  
rev up a jealous noise I will hear

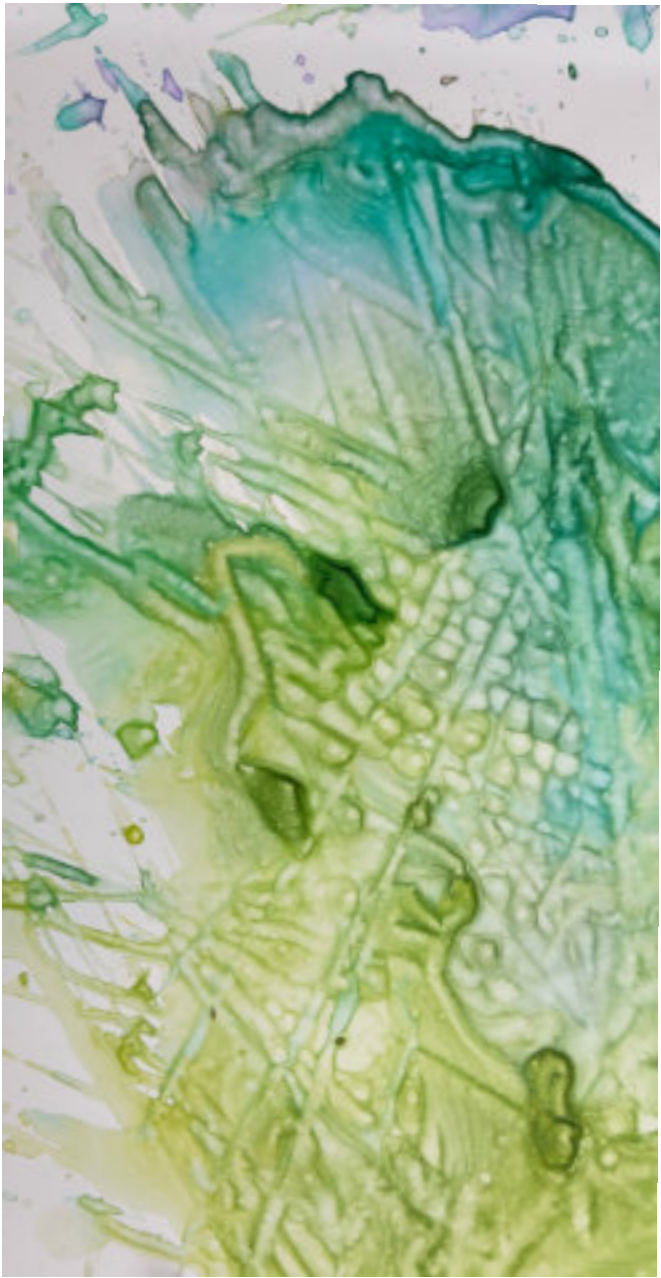
for decades. My father's bow tie  
bobs up and down as he talks  
about the damn clutch that sticks  
not knowing the hand brake will fail

and the damn truck will slide, bump  
into the neighbors' tree. They don't know  
any of this except the rain will fall.  
He cannot wait to take me fishing,

cast a dry fly or Royal Coachman  
across a stream. Grandfather died  
before my father turned 1. Here is  
the hope that the fish will bite

that the father-son bond will blend.  
Father and I will fish. The steelhead  
won't bite but we will touch  
the rain through the days.

ATACAMA



ALLISON PADRON

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## ICE BOX

The tip of Rodney's nose was blue.

Henry stared at it through the blurring edges of his vision. Rodney lifted a gloved hand and made a feeble attempt at snapping.

"Are you listening to me, man?" he asked, raising his voice over the howling of the wind.

Henry flinched. His stiff fingers, buried in the pockets of his winter coat, had begun to ache. "Sorry. What did you say?"

"I asked if we had any jerky left."

"I dunno."

"Well, check, damn it."

Henry bit back a groan and shifted from his spot by the tent wall. He crawled the few feet to the backpack and pulled out a half-eaten granola bar and a nearly empty bag of jerky.

Rodney took the jerky bag, ripped it open, then paused. "Do you think it'll be okay if I finish it off?" He asked, his narrow brown eyes locked on the pieces of dried meat.

"Definitely." Henry curled back in on himself, trying to quell the shaking of his body. Then he repeated the mantra he'd said at least three times in the past two hours. "The storm will pass. Then we can head back down to the ranger station."

Rodney nodded as he gnawed on a strip of jerky. "Exactly, man. Exactly. It can't last much longer."

The storm had been raging for three nights, turning the world outside into a white wasteland by day and an icy blackness by night. For the last two days, they'd debated attempting the descent, even with the heavy snowfall. Today, neither of them had suggested it.

Henry had never been so cold in his life. He wished they hadn't worked their way through the last of the whiskey. He wished he was home, on his couch. Instead, he resigned himself to staring at the man who sat a few feet away, whom he hadn't seen for years before this failure of a backpacking trip. Rodney was just as pinch-faced as Henry remembered, with his black pencil mustache and thin lips. His skinny frame was concealed by the puffiness of his orange jacket. The blue on his nose had spread.

Rodney caught him staring and flashed him a grin. "Not quite the boy's trip we were imagining, huh?"

Henry shrugged his shaking shoulders, trying and failing to return the smile. "No big deal. We'll warm up at my place soon enough—the storm will pass."

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The original call from Rodney had come at one in the morning, waking Henry from his beer-soaked sleep. He'd rolled over on the couch, muting the rerun of a crime show playing on the television and fishing his cell phone out from between the couch cushions.

"Hey, man," a frenetic voice crackled. "Have you ever climbed Rainier?"

Henry rubbed his eyes and tried to piece together a coherent response. "Who is this?"

"C'mon, Henry. It's Rodney—Rodney Caruso."

After what felt like a full minute, it hit him. They'd run cross-country together. "Oh. Hey, Rodney."

"I was thinking of flying up next week and climbing Rainier. Are you free?"

"I—" Henry's head was pounding. He pressed a hand to his temple, closing his eyes against the glare of the television, and tried again. "Maybe I can do next weekend. Are you bringing Noel?"

There was a pause—uncharacteristic for Rodney, who was usually incapable of silence. "Nah, man. I figured it could be a guy's weekend. And who better to ask than you? You've been up there for a few months now, right? I've seen your pictures on Facebook."

Henry cleared his throat, willing the conversation to end so he could go back to sleep. "About a year."

"And you've climbed Rainier?"

"Part of the way. Never summited."

"Excellent. We can do it together. I'll book a flight and call you later with the details."

Henry had just started to ask why when the line went dead. Still bleary and confused, he threw his phone on the table and surrendered to sleep again.

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Rodney, true to his word, arrived a little over a week later. He waltzed out of the airport and into Henry's car with only a duffel bag.

"You'll need more than that to climb Rainier," Henry remarked drily, narrowly avoiding another car as he pulled out of the passenger pick-up lane and back into the flow of traffic.

Rodney's knee was bouncing, his eyes peering out the window as they drove. "I'll buy more gear in town."

"Yeah, man, I was thinking... it's pretty late in the season to be climbing, anyway. There's regular snowfall up there right now. Maybe we could just relax. Get some beers, hike the lower elevation trails. Go for a run or two."

Rodney glanced at him with a frown, drumming his fingers on his leg. "Scared of some flurries, Beckett?"



Henry rolled his eyes as he merged onto the highway. “No. I just don’t understand why this is happening on such short notice. I haven’t heard from you in—what, five years, man? Why now?”

His friend fell silent for a moment, then shrugged. “Noel and I are having some issues.”

“Oh.” Henry cleared his throat. “Sorry to hear it.”

“Yeah, well, she wanted a weekend away. To ‘think things through’. It’s such bullshit,” Rodney grumbled, his gaze fixed on the sky. “She suggested I take one too. I figured... well, I knew you’d understand.”

A lance of pain shot through Henry’s chest. He let out a slow exhale. “I get it, man.”

“I’m glad to get away, honestly. She took the dog with her—and despite how much she talks about wanting them, we still don’t have kids, so it was easy to just pack and go.” Rodney didn’t look away from the window, didn’t notice the grimace that twisted Henry’s features. “The most she’s going to do is paint her nails and drink mimosas with her sister. I figured I could at least conquer a mountain. Have something to show for it.”

“Well, it’s been a while, but we did Elbert. We can do Rainier.” Henry adjusted the radio, rolled the windows down. Being around someone familiar helped him feel like a human being again. “I need to get out of the house, anyway. This’ll be good for both of us.”

Rodney clapped his shoulder with a grin. “There’s the Henry I remember. How’s work? Still doing IT?”

“Yeah. Remote. Still at the dealership?”

“Nah. I switched to solar sales a few months ago.”

“Oh. Cool.”

They drifted into conversations about work, running, their favorite breweries—avoiding mentions of Noel, or Liz, or little Lucas. Better to face it on the mountain.

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On Saturday morning, under a sky cloaked in gray, they began the hike up to Camp Muir. Though he didn’t say it out loud, Henry had to admit he was relieved they’d abandoned the idea of summiting. Rodney had totaled up the price of the gear he’d need to purchase and quickly scaled back his ambitions. It would still be a brutal climb for how out of practice they were, but at least the trek had been demoted from potential suicide to mere self-punishment.

In a nostalgia that bordered on reverence, they reminisced over their years at CU Boulder, over the classes they skipped and the parties they attended.

“Though you never really got the full experience,” Rodney said. “Who follows their girlfriend to college? That’s getting rid of half the fun.”

Henry couldn't think of a response. It felt disloyal to Liz to agree, but... well, Liz shared Rodney's opinion. It wasn't like things had worked out between them, anyway.

As they began crossing the snowfield, the fog drifted in, obscuring even the nearby orange of Rodney's jacket. They continued on for a while, but Henry began to suspect they'd gone off-route. So they stopped and set up their tents for the night.

After the sun set, the storm began.

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The first night was fun. They chased down bites of trail mix with swallows of whiskey until their cheeks were red. Rodney had plenty of stories—rude customers, clownish coworkers, drunken exploits.

"I'm glad you find it funny," he said, wiping a trail of whiskey off his chin before passing the bottle to Henry. "Noel said it was childish to keep acting like a frat boy."

There was an awkward silence, then Henry dared to ask. "What happened with you two?"

Rodney shook his head. "Nothing. It was stupid. We fought—but hell, we fought all the time, man. She said she was tired of handling all my issues. She wanted me to go to therapy."

"Did you?"

"Do I look like a fucking pansy to you, Beckett?"

Henry rubbed the back of his neck, taking a sip of whiskey to delay his response. "No. It's just—well, it might help."

Rodney gave him a withering stare. "Did it help you and Liz?"

"That's not fucking cool, man," Henry responded, ignoring the ache in his chest. "It's different. We weren't—we never fought."

"Whatever," his friend grumbled. He began rolling out his sleeping bag, ignoring Henry. They lay facing away from each other, lulled to sleep by the wailing of the wind.

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In the morning, the storm hadn't lessened. The two of them pretended away the previous night's argument and assured each other the snow would stop soon. Rainier's weather was known for being temperamental, and a storm like this shouldn't—couldn't—last much longer. Henry connected his phone to a portable charger. They might've called to let someone know where they were, but neither of them had any signal up here. So Henry stared at his lockscreen, at the picture of Lucas on their backyard swingset, his freckled features twisted with glee. The perpetual scrapes on his knobby knees were patched with Spiderman band-aids. The photo made him smile, but it also made his eyes sting, so he put his phone away again.

As the day drew on, the storm worsened. Henry and Rodney wore

several layers each, but still sat shivering in the gray half-light. They drank more whiskey, ate jerky and half-frozen energy bars.

"I guess we'll have to go back down when this lets up," Henry said. He'd gone outside to piss and come back frosted over.

Rodney slumped onto his sleeping bag, eyes locked on the ceiling of their tent. The merciless wind rippled across the fabric. "This was a stupid idea."

Henry's body quaked as he slid into his own sleeping bag. "Nah, man. We were just unlucky."

"Noel would say it was stupid," he said quietly. "That I was trying to prove myself, per usual. That I'm always trying and failing to live up to some impossible standard."

"She said that about you?"

Rodney cleared his throat and turned onto his side, putting his back to Henry. "Yeah. Maybe she's right. I can't make it to the summit. I can't fix our marriage. I can't actually do anything."

"Hey." Henry sat up, frowning. "Noel loves you, man. This is just a bump in the road."

"I know," the other man said, still facing the wall. "I just—I wanted to do this. I wanted to accomplish something. It's been a rough few years. Ever since we graduated... I don't know, I've been bouncing between jobs. I guess I've been drinking more than I should. Noel's been good to me, but she thinks it all stems from my dad. That's why she wants me to see a shrink."

"You think she's wrong?"

"Nah. Not entirely. Just... I know exactly what my dad would say if he could see me blabbing about my feelings for an hour every week."

There were a few heartbeats of silence, then Henry delicately said, "I don't think that's a reason to not go, though."

"Yeah. Yeah, I know," Rodney muttered. "I figured I'd give in and go, in the end. For her. I just... wanted to summit this dumb mountain first. I wanted to know that I could."

"I get it."

"What happened with you and Liz?" The words made Henry close his eyes. His friend went on, "I mean, you guys were together for more than a decade—high school, college, wedding, kid. Then one day you just moved to Washington."

"Nothing happened on my end," Henry said quietly, his voice nearly drowned by the wind. "I was happy. I didn't want any of it to change. But Liz... she said she was too young when we got together. That she didn't get a chance to experience the world. We tried therapy, but she was still so miserable. When she asked for a divorce... I had to get away. I came up here."

“Don’t you miss Lucas?”

“Of course I do. I call him three times a week. He’s supposed to come up for Thanksgiving.” Henry stared into the dark of his eyelids, at the imprint of Spiderman band-aids. “I never wanted to leave him behind, but I just couldn’t stay and watch Liz live a life without me. And I couldn’t tear him away from his friends, his school. It... it isn’t the same as it was, but I’m trying to make the best of it. I’m trying to take it day by day.”

Rodney was quiet for a moment. Then he sat up and sighed. “Jesus, this sucks,” he said. He passed the bottle of whiskey to Henry, who silently raised it. They toasted to their despair while the snow closed in around them.

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They finished the jerky, the granola bars, the whiskey, and the fruit. Henry sat, watched Rodney’s face turn blue, and waited for the storm to pass. Like he’d sat and waited for the storm with Liz to pass for over a year now. With both, he was beginning to suspect there’d be no end. No return to normal.

As he drifted in and out of sleep, he dreamt of her. Of the countless half-finished scarves she left around the house as she began new projects. Of her trashy reality shows that he hated but still lurked near the couch to watch. Of her golden-brown hair, always thrown in a haphazard bun. Of her car, filled with empty fast food cups and wrappers. He’d always found her car disgusting. Now he wanted nothing more than to push cups off the seat and drive somewhere. Nowhere. Anywhere—as long as it was with her.

He was stirred from his sleep when Rodney mumbled something. Henry sat up and turned to his friend. “Huh?”

“I said I’m going to go to therapy,” he said, his words slurring together. “I’ll be a pansy if the alternative is losing her.”

“Good.” Henry slapped a clumsy hand on his shoulder. “That’s good, man. If you’re both still fighting, there’s still hope.”

Rodney’s next words were too disjointed to understand. Henry pulled the blanket higher around his friend before returning to his own sleeping bag.

When he woke again, he reached for the television remote, to change the channel. His fingers brushed his phone instead, and he picked it up to check the time—one in the morning. Where was the television? Where was the couch?

It took him several moments to remember he was in a tent. Hiking with Rodney. Right. He turned to his friend, who stared up at the ceiling.

“Pass me the whiskey,” he said, reaching for Rodney’s shoulder. His hand fell harder than he intended, striking a blow instead of a pat.

Rodney didn’t move. His unblinking eyes were fixated on the fabric of

the tent overhead. His face had gone entirely blue.

“Someone’s sleepy,” Henry remarked with a laugh. Then he stood in jerky, uncoordinated movements. He found the bag and rummaged in it, searching for the whiskey bottle, until the world went black.

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A voice woke him from his sleep. Liz’s voice—beautiful, slightly raspy. “Henry?” She called from outside the tent. “Henry, come here.”

Henry stumbled out the door, into the whiteness of the snow. At least it wasn’t cold anymore—it was warm, so warm, with Liz here. She stood a few feet away, beside their bed, dressed in her favorite blue-striped pajama set. Her smile was the most beautiful thing Henry had ever seen.

“Come to bed,” she said, beckoning him closer. “It’s late.”

Henry smiled and wrapped his arms around her waist. He buried his face in her hair and breathed in the ghost of her scent. “I miss you,” he told her softly. “I miss Lucas.”

“What do you mean?” She laughed, leaning into his chest. “Lucas is fast asleep, and I’m right here.”

Even he wasn’t sure what he was talking about. Liz was right—she was right there. He could feel her in his arms. So Henry did what he most wanted to. He kissed her. He slipped her clothes from her shoulders, removed his cumbersome snow jacket and pants, and climbed between the white sheets with her. Under the night-soaked blizzard, Henry returned to Liz.

JOHN DORROH

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## UPON YOUR MOVE TO THE GREAT NORTHWEST

Before you pack your belongings & move to Seattle think long & hard about the fish they toss at Pike's Market, fat red fish that fly through the air at 35 mph. Think about getting finned across the face leaving grill marks on your cheeks for your first day at work. Think about the rain & all the clouds that convert your reserves of Vitamin D into ash that clogs your carotid arteries. Think about the high cost of living & the traffic that oozes across floating bridges. That's just not right. Think about how far you'll be from your lifelong friends & your parents who will need you close by as their lives begin to fade like exhausted stars. Think about the amount of coffee that you'll be required to drink & your proximity to volcanoes that will eventually spew their hot guts into your eyes. Wait until then to cook that fish.

MICHAEL SHOEMAKER

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## WATER LILY



LYNN GILBERT

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SEPTEMBER SONG

Nothing green lasts long.  
Wind rattles the leaves:  
autumn nears headlong.  
Nothing green lasts long!  
Summer was my song;  
now the season grieves.  
Nothing green lasts long;  
wind rattles the leaves.



ANGIE MACRI

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SIGNAL

The bear saw her tears as ocean returning to the forest,  
a body of water so old, the old stories  
didn't include it. More ancient than  
than constellations as freckles  
on her arms and face, the latter brighter now,  
wet with crying. The girl had only wanted  
something to eat, a place to rest,  
but that was more than most had these days  
when dreams like hunger grew claws  
and teeth longer than fingers.  
Hers pressed together, mouth and hands:  
please don't hurt me. In the next generation of stories,  
the bear became three, with house, chairs, food, beds.  
The girl's hair was bright, not her face, like gold  
people valued. She didn't cry  
but ran out the door when woken, and the ocean  
didn't exist, didn't enter the forest  
until it swam in her eyes,  
then fell like groves of stars cut close to the earth.

ONE TIME

My daughter is alone after dance class  
waiting for me to pick her up;  
her mother out of town,  
her big sister at home sick.  
I'm online: an intense meeting,  
the dog is whining, wanting  
water and a walk outside.  
She's 12 years old, not a baby,  
but a girl walking alone in the city?  
A doorbell and then I remember.  
Yell her name and run out of the flat.  
No one's there so I sprint back.  
Take the car from the garage  
and I'm too late to be a good  
father; too late for good anything.  
Her sister phones and says: "Eva's here."  
I whip myself with words  
then chant hasty prayers of thanks.  
When I rush into the house  
her back is turned, her perfect  
little self in her dance clothes.  
Face red from running, but she  
can't help but giggle at my pathos.  
Relieved, herself, after worrying  
that something had happened to me.  
Something so big that I wasn't there  
for her. This happened one time.  
It was just the other day.  
We still cry about it.

DON SCHOFIELD

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## IDES OF MARCH

Tomorrow is March 15, the Ides of March. That's what the substitute teacher for 4<sup>th</sup> Grade told us yesterday. "Beware the Ides of March," she said, almost like a Halloween goblin, then told us the story of Julius Caesar and the soothsayer, and how Romans used to believe that this was the day people were supposed to pay off their debts. She also had to explain what "debt" means, and I still don't get what sorts of things we're supposed to "pay off" today.

And now I'm confused by Dad as well. This morning at breakfast, he told me he wants to talk to me, out on the patio.

"But it's cold outside," I told him, knowing the meeting probably means trouble.

"I don't care, Gordon, we need to talk, just the two of us."

Things have not been great these last couple months. "From bad to worse," as I heard Nora tell him a couple weeks ago. They were watching TV and thought I was in bed asleep.

I've been getting into trouble a lot these days, I know, and at night I can't sleep. I lie there worrying what will happen to me, afraid Dad will give me to some stranger again.

That's why I get out of bed some nights and sneak into the hallway, sit on the little round stool by the telephone and try to hear what they're saying in the living room, there on the couch. Nora, my stepmother, will say things like, "He just doesn't listen to me anymore. Keeps sassing back," or, "When I try to clean up after him—and after you too—he keeps following me around, asking stupid questions. I tell him to go outside and five minutes later he comes back in, letting the screen door slam behind him, tromping dirt everywhere. Then he starts following me around again, while I'm tryin' to vacuum or dust or polish the furniture. I'm at wits' end."

Usually Dad stays silent, just lets her talk, except, once in a while, he mumbles, "Okay, I'll talk to him."

Though he doesn't say much, it's his voice I listen for. I know all too well he can send me away with barely a second thought. As it is, he's been getting more and more impatient with me these days, especially when he comes home from a run and Nora tells him all the bad things I've done—the usual stuff, like how much electricity I'm wasting, all the times I tangled up the phone cord—and now worse things, things even I can see are bad. I guess that's why I'm talking back to Nora so much, because I feel guilty. Deep down I know I'm bad, but I just can't admit it, not to her, not to Dad, not even to myself.

And because I feel guilty, I keep doing worse things. Go figure that out.

Like one night, a while back, they went off to some friends' house to play cards and left me alone in the house. I watched TV for a while, then put on a couple records. Dean Martin. Bing Crosby. That's the only kind of music they have. But I got bored with that too. When I went into the bathroom to pee, I saw one of Nora's combs on a shelf, a "rattail comb" (as Nan, my foster mother, used to call them) and decided to go play on the couch, pretending I'm wrestling a bear like Davey Crockett does, stabbing at the wall behind the couch a few times until I killed "that there bar," like Davey would say.

The next day, while Nora was vacuuming (like every day), she found flecks of plaster on the carpet behind the couch and then some little holes in the wall. She didn't say anything to me, but I could tell she was mad by the scowl on her face. Dad had left on a run early that morning, so didn't learn about the damage I caused until he came home a day later.

Nora didn't speak to me the whole time he was gone, and I did all I could to avoid her.

But when Dad got home, even before he got out of his Greyhound uniform, he took me by the arm and marched me into the living room, pointed to the wall, and asked, "Know anything about this, Gordon?"

"No, no idea."

Dad didn't even wait to question me more. He pushed me so I fell to the couch and, with me sitting there looking up at him, started wagging his finger at me like Nora does and telling me I must straighten up. "You better stop lying to us, young man, and do what your stepmother says. And no more roughhousing indoors. Got it?"

"Get to your room!" Nora added from where she'd been standing, just behind him, "And don't come out until we tell you!"

That was a couple weeks ago. I moped about for a few days, didn't pay much attention in class and walked even slower to and from school. Why did I do such a stupid thing? I knew they'd see the holes in the wall. How could they not? So why did I lie? No one else could've done it. And why keep lying, even after I was punished, what with Nora telling me every day, sometimes two or three times, that I better change my ways "or there'll be Hell to pay around here"?

But that wasn't the worst. A few days ago, when Nora sent me to buy some marshmallows at the Lucky Supermarket on Folsom, I stole a combination lock by shoving it down my pants.

By the time I found the marshmallows the lock was snug against my crotch and I was sure nobody could see it there. I paid for the marshmallows—hiding my nervousness as best I could—and walked out the big sliding doors. Not even a second later a man stepped in front of me, a bagger it seemed, with the Lucky emblem on his cap and shirt pocket.

“You need to come with me,” he said as he put his weight on the rubber mat that made the doors hiss open.

He took me to a small office above the produce section, where the manager ordered me to sit down and then told me they saw me take the lock.

“What lock? All I have is marshmallows?”

“Take down your pants, then; let’s see what you have there.”

The manager’s round, chubby face looked a little like my dad’s, though Dad was older.

“Please don’t call my parents,” I begged as I reached inside my jeans and jiggled the package with the lock up over my stomach.

“Sorry, no can do. Give me your number.”

I hardly listened to what Nora said as we made the short drive home—I’d heard it all before—How bad I am. How evil. How I don’t appreciate what she and my father do for me. And she kept repeating, “There’ll be Hell to pay when your father gets home, don’t you worry.”

She was right. When Dad returned that evening, even though dinner was ready, he didn’t say a word. He just led me out to the garage, told me to pull down my pants and lean over the workbench. As he took his belt off, the memory of Papa doing the same thing came back to me. Dad’s belt wasn’t as thick, and his pants weren’t falling down like my foster father’s always did.

Ten swats he gave me, on my butt and the back of my thighs. But he didn’t hit as hard as Papa did, and not with his intensity. Dad was mad, for sure. This was the first time he’d ever spanked me, at least as far as I could remember. But for whatever reason, he clearly didn’t like hitting me. I don’t think it had much to do with hurting me, though that was there a little. I had the idea, for some reason, that he didn’t like whipping me because it was all too emotional for him. If he was lashing my bare butt with his belt, he couldn’t keep me at a distance like he always does. Maybe he felt he had to become more Jack, the Greyhound bus driver, than Gordon, my father, in order to hit me. Jack didn’t belong here, not in this house on 56<sup>th</sup>, and not in the garage, spanking a nine-year-old.

I don’t know. All I can say for sure is that he didn’t whip me all that hard, and once he was done he turned and left without saying a word.

When I got back into the house, we all sat down for dinner. After Nora served the meatloaf and mashed potatoes, passed around the string beans and poured the gravy, she started in again, but my body went rigid. I just couldn’t take her anymore. She was obviously happy Dad had spanked me. “At last!” she said to both of us, and made it clear such punishments would be happening a lot more around here. Dad, as usual, was silent. And I was too hungry, too hurt and too angry to pay attention.

I quickly finished my plate, got up (without permission) and went to my room, threw myself on my bed and stayed there the rest of the night,

thinking about how I could escape from this house—from Nora!—wishing for the first time (or at least admitting it to myself) that I could go back to my foster parents in Fresno. Thinking too how stupid I was to steal that lock. Why? I had nothing to lock up, not at school, not here. Where would I use it? Maybe I just liked the idea of having a lock, or thought that it would be fun memorizing the combination, kind of like having magical powers with those three numbers—one turn right (as the instructions on the package said), two turns left, then right again, and, bingo, it would open!

Then I thought about how nobody understood me, not Nora, not Dad, not the teachers and principal at school, not even the other kids. I was tired of playing boring board games in the house or bouncing my ball in the driveway all afternoon, alone. Tired of trying to talk to Dad and him not listening. Tired of Nora tearing me down. And tired of trying to impress my schoolmates. None of them believed me anymore anyway. No I didn't kill a bear. And no, I didn't hunt moose. And I can barely remember what my friend Moose looked like, up there on the wall above the couch in our cabin (only that I tore off his poor dewlap), or how Papa and I caught rattlesnakes and sold them for their venom. All that seems so long ago by now.

But now I'm here with Dad. He's the one that counts. He should be protecting me, not kowtowing to Nora all the time. He owes me anyway, for giving me to that redhead in that bar in Fresno. If anyone owes a debt on the Ides of March, it's him.

Lying there, getting angrier and angrier, I told myself that Dad really didn't have to spank me. And he didn't need to listen to Nora. When we were still with Mom, before he took me away from my brother and sister, he wouldn't let her punish me at all—I remember that! If she spanked me, I'd run and tell him, and sure enough he'd wind up yelling at her, sometimes smacking her like she had smacked me.

Those days are gone.

And now I'm on the patio waiting for him to come and talk to me, just the two of us, on the Ides of March as it turns out. So, yeah, I guess there's Hell to pay. And I have no idea what the price will be.

And here he comes, out the door, down the steps.

He pulls the chair facing the back door out from the table and sits, the hairs on his chest showing over the top of his white undershirt. His shirt is open, though it's cold. He's wearing slacks and slippers, what he usually wears around the house.

If he's sitting at 12:00, I'm at 3:00, my back to the swing seat. He takes a pack of Lucky Strikes from his shirt pocket, tamps it against the table, once, twice, three times, not too hard, but still the smack can be heard each time, as if to say, *I'm in charge here. I'm the boss.*

He peels away the top of the pack, pulls out a cigarette and lights it with

that big Zippo of his, the one that opens with a *click* and closes with a *clump*, looks up at the screen door, then over to the kitchen window. I can't see her because of the screen, but I know Nora's there, leaning over the sink and watching us, as eager to hear what my father has to say as I am, but for completely different reasons. He hasn't said a word, and neither has she, but I know they want me out. "They" means "she."

And I want out too. I just don't know where they'll put me. Maybe I'll get lucky and they'll send me back to Nan and Papa. But I doubt it. I haven't heard from them in a long time.

Dad takes a deep puff on his cigarette, holds his breath for a second, then exhales in a long, slow stream of smoke. Taps the ash from his cigarette and, for the first time since we've been sitting here, looks directly at me.

"Gordon, what is it you want?"

"What do you mean?"

"What are you after? Why are you acting the way you are?"

"I want what any kid wants, I guess."

"What's that?"

"I don't know. A home. Friends. Food. The chance to go to school, I guess."

I wanted to say, *You, Dad. You. A father who's really a father. And a mother who treats me nice, at least sometimes, who doesn't spend all her time telling me how bad I am. I want a real family, not this fakey-fake one!* But I can't say any of that.

"Don't you have all that here, home, friends, food? And you have a mother who gives you all that. She let you come into her home. And every day cooks and cleans and washes for you (He's saying all that, I know, because it's what she wants to hear). You don't seem to appreciate any of it."

"I do, it's just that..."

"And I work hard for you, so you can have a roof over your head, nice clothes, plenty of food. You think I like driving busses? You owe it to me to be a good boy and appreciate what we have here. That's the least you can do."

I want to say, *Lies! All lies! You don't really care. You're gone all the time, and when you're home, you just sit on the couch and watch TV or read your stupid newspaper, cut farts and laugh to yourself. How can I appreciate that? The only thing you care about is that your uniform is cleaned and pressed, your shoes shined. You spend more time in the garage polishing your shoes than you do with me. And you believe everything Nora tells you. So where's this father I supposedly owe something to?*

I don't speak. I just look at him, then look away, tears welling up in my eyes, and finally say, "I know."

"I've tried to make a home for you here, Gordon, but you seem to be doing everything you can to wreck it. Sometimes I think you don't even want

me to have a home here. Is that what you want, Gordon? To make Nora kick *me* out too?"

That "too" hits me hard. So it's out now. That's what she wants. Me out!

"No, that's not what I want," I say, head bowed, tears running down my cheeks (*Damn tears!*).

"Easter's a couple weeks away, Gordon. You have to move out. We've decided to put you in a school. A Catholic school..."

That they want to put me in some school doesn't surprise me; that it's Catholic does (my stepmother surely doesn't like that idea). And at the same time it hurts to hear him actually say they want me out, to actually hear the words, *move out*. From somewhere deep inside of me I feel another word rising, like a shark, or an enemy submarine, a word I learned at school a couple weeks ago: "Neglect." When I heard the teacher explain what that word means it was like a bullet through the heart. I thought, *Yeah, that's Dad. That's the problem*. And it's true. He doesn't take care of me. He says he wants me with him, but never pays any attention to me. That's always been the problem with Dad. It's like I don't exist for him, even when he's here in the house, sitting right next to me on the couch or at the dining room table. I don't exist because *he* doesn't exist. Whenever he's here he's always somewhere else. And now he's gonna send me away, far from him again, make me go live with strangers, like before.

"...a place called St. Patrick's. You'll like it there. You'll have lots of other boys to play with, and the nuns will teach you discipline. And you'll be back with other Catholics. That should please you."

Now I'm empty. I don't know what to say. There's silence between us, a painful, aching silence. It feels like forever.

He lights another cigarette, inhales deeply again, then exhales, even slower than before, as if he's exhaling every last bit of hope he ever had for me, for the son he chose. But now he's chosen Nora, and I'm going away.

He gets up. I can feel the metal chair scraping against the concrete, as if it were scraping against my insides. I feel his footsteps as he climbs the backdoor steps and opens the screen door. Before he goes in, I raise my head and ask, though I try to stop myself, "Will I ever see you?"

The screen door swings closed behind him. I see the blur of his hand on the other side of the screen as he reaches up to catch it before it slams.

Too late.



CARELLA KEIL

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## QUEEN OF SPADES

For three days I sat in a hole staring up at the moon. On the third night, I climbed out, carrying the Queen of Diamonds on my back. Her tears could sink a ship, and sway the moon off its course. I prefer an anchor to the earth.

Underground, mesmerized by the strength of her own flame, Diamonds said, "Hatred is better than indifference. You won't understand, for you were once eight pawns, and I was always a Queen. Off with her head, off with her head, off with her head." I turn the statement over, until it is flat on all sides, and build a rungless ladder out of it.

On the surface, the sky glitters and the grass shimmers with rain. The scent of petrichor, worms in the dirt, and a far-off city eroding itself.

The path is dense with leaves, green palms gently slapping our faces. I slash through them, releasing pent-up anxiety. Diamonds sulks, but her feet are light as air. My energy bursts like a pulsar while her's falters, a collapsing star. She floats slightly behind me, silent.

My amber eyes glow and I growl, a low rumble. I transform into a panther, streaking through the night like fibrous lightning. I embrace my freedom and lick the dirt from my paws. I sense Diamonds has deserted me. It is never for long; her desires wax with the moon. At New Moon she will pick a mate, and at Full Moon inevitably abandon him, folding back to me.

This one's pull was different, she's convinced. "You're so beautiful I could cry," he said, but then he wiped away her eyes. They grew back, silver reservoirs of sadness.

I never make that mistake more than once. As a pawn I could not afford to. As a Queen, I am infinitely more careful. If I shed a tear, it will grow into a spear. I love the practicality of emotion, this adornment of daggers. I carve constellations into the sky with them, tracing our journey from one harbour to the next, as fate shuffles us across the stars.

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수연 최 ZANOO CHOI

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## FLOATING MATTER 4



10:4: TENN PLAYWRITING CONTEST WINNER

STEVEN MILLER

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LUNÉE BIN

*A Tennessee Williams-inspired ten-minute play  
Blanche Dubois arrives in the looney bin*

*Cast of Characters*

DOCTOR: a psychiatrist

NURSE: a psychiatric nurse

PATIENT: Blanche Dubois from "A Streetcar Named Desire"

*Setting*

A doctor's office in a psychiatric hospital in New Orleans. There is a desk with papers on it and an office chair behind it, along with another chair for sitting. There is also a wastebasket.

*Time*

A couple of hours after the end of A Streetcar Named Desire.

*(The DOCTOR is reviewing papers at the desk. After a moment, the NURSE enters and stands in front of him. She is carrying a folder.)*

DOCTOR: *(looking up, peeved)* Why are you bothering me? Isn't she settled in yet?

NURSE: No.

DOCTOR: Have you given her the sedative I prescribed?

NURSE: We can't. She won't let any of us nurses near her.

DOCTOR: Well, have the orderly hold her arm while you inject her. She was cooperative when we brought her in. I don't know what you've done to set her off.

NURSE: *(holding her tongue to prevent an outburst)* She isn't settled in, but she has settled down. She's with Randall.

DOCTOR: The janitor?

NURSE: She saw his uniform and sidled right up to him.

*(The DOCTOR looks at her questioningly.)*

Apparently, she loves the sight of a man in uniform.

DOCTOR: And you haven't given her the sedative?

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NURSE: She gets violent if a nurse approaches her. (*indicating the folder she is holding*) I can't complete her paperwork until we've given her your prescription.

DOCTOR: (*sighing*) Have her come in here.

NURSE: Randall says that escorting patients isn't his job.

DOCTOR: (*dismissively*) And you can't handle her. Or Randall, for that matter. (*exasperated*) Fine. I'll handle it myself.

NURSE: In here? She won't come willingly.

*(The DOCTOR stands and heads for the exit.)*

DOCTOR: (*exasperated*) She'll come. Make sure her paperwork is laid out on my desk.

NURSE: (*with barely disguised sarcasm*) Yes, Doctor.

*(The DOCTOR gives the NURSE a disapproving look and exits, speaking to himself)*

DOCTOR: The incompetence in this place is astounding.

*(The NURSE straightens up the papers on the desk and lays out the folder she carried in. The DOCTOR then returns with the PATIENT, who has draped herself on his arm. He gives a look to the NURSE indicating that he has had no trouble whatsoever. The DOCTOR indicates the guest chair to the PATIENT, speaking with professional detachment.)*

Please have a seat.

*(The PATIENT shies away from the NURSE, clutching on to the DOCTOR. The DOCTOR motions the NURSE away, with a gesture or the mouthed word "syringe" to let her know to return with the injection. The NURSE exits.)*

Please, sit.

*(The PATIENT disengages herself from his arm and sits. The DOCTOR sits in the desk chair.)*

Are you comfortable?

*(The PATIENT smiles and nods.)*

Can I offer you anything?

*(The PATIENT puts two fingers to her lips, indicating a smoke, then looks about herself a bit frantically, searching for her purse.)*

Your purse was taken from you in the lobby. And smoking isn't allowed in the offices. Do you need something to calm you?

*(The PATIENT has a lost look in her eyes and doesn't focus on the DOCTOR, but rather on her own thoughts. The DOCTOR rises and moves to the side of the stage, perhaps opening a door. The NURSE appears, carrying a syringe at the ready. The DOCTOR waves her in.)*

About time, Nurse.

*(The words attract the PATIENT's attention. The NURSE moves toward the PATIENT, but the PATIENT shrinks away from the NURSE, a wild look in her eyes. The NURSE stops and looks at the DOCTOR with an "I told you so" look in her eyes. The DOCTOR takes the syringe and waves the NURSE away. The NURSE exits. The PATIENT calms down. The DOCTOR approaches the PATIENT with the syringe.)*

You'll barely feel this.

*(The PATIENT looks calmly at the DOCTOR, with mingled hope and pleading in her eyes. She doesn't resist when the doctor unbuttons her sleeve, but when the DOCTOR sees the look in her eyes, he places the syringe on the desk and sits back down.)*

I guess you don't need this right away.

PATIENT: *(re-buttoning her sleeve)* Je suis toujours bien lunée.

*(The DOCTOR looks wonderingly at the folder on his desk.)*

DOCTOR: French? I knew the name was French, but I assumed... *(speaking clearly to the patient)* Do you understand English?

PATIENT: *(charmingly)* Of course. I'm sorry to confuse you. I simply said I am always good-tempered. It's a saying embroidered in the schoolroom of the French teacher here. Surely you've seen it. And I remember my grandmother repeating it to herself when I was but a child, whenever one of the servants did something that would otherwise have set her into a rage. But I ramble. What did you wish to discuss?

DOCTOR: Do you know where you are?

PATIENT: Of course, Principal. We are in your office.

DOCTOR: *(formulating a follow-up question after at first being taken somewhat aback)* Did you pass any pupils on your way here?

PATIENT: So many of the older male students are enlisting these days. With the war on, of course, they feel it is their patriotic duty. One came up to me just now. A recent graduate, I believe. I had to ask his name. Randall, I believe. He looked so handsome in his uniform.

DOCTOR: Did he tell you his rank?

PATIENT: A private, I assume.

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DOCTOR: What branch of the service is he in? Did you note his insignia?

PATIENT: (*confused*) No. I didn't see any.

DOCTOR: (*with a firm, detached tone*) Perhaps he isn't a serviceman. And perhaps you're not a teacher.

PATIENT: (*agitated*) Please, Principal. It won't happen again. It was the uniform! It made him look so much older. He wasn't my student any longer, tentatively exploring the wonders of our language and its literature. He was a man. It was the uniform. He was enlisting after graduation, he said. And he put on his older brother's uniform. And isn't it our duty to support the young men going off to war, perhaps never to return again? Isn't it our duty? (*transitioning to a more meditative mood*) And when he was in the camp, so close to where I still managed to live, he would come and call to me. And his friends. They all came and called to me. And isn't it our duty? Each so like the young man I lost, who said he desired me. And the soldiers said the same. So handsome in their uniforms.

DOCTOR: (*gently, but insistently*) Where are you?

PATIENT: (*answering the DOCTOR obliquely*) They tried to take me to the wrong room. My room is on the second floor, with the tiny balcony outside my window where I step out, when the weather allows. And the gentlemen tip their hats, and many hurry up, saying they knew a serviceman who had once made my acquaintance outside of town, back at... I suppose you'd call it my homestead, although it was far grander in its heyday than the word "homestead" would imply. "Beautiful Dream." I will spare you the French.

(*The PATIENT trails off, in reverie.*)

DOCTOR: You say "the wrong room?"

PATIENT: Mine is on the second floor. As proprietor of the Flamingo Hotel, you know that. They tried to bundle me into a first-floor room.

DOCTOR: Who did?

PATIENT: Those severe-looking ladies. So insistent, with their pinched faces and their bad skin, when just a touch of cosmetics and a splash of color would improve their looks immeasurably. It's the fine things in life that make the everyday bearable. The unexpected sparkle of a swaying, suddenly revealed bauble, the subtle glow of a silk scarf draped over the harsh white illumination of a light bulb. The things in my room that turn it into a refuge, romantic and calming. (*with sudden vehemence*) And they tried to push me into an unadorned room – white walls; white, unforgiving light. I demand my lodgings on the second floor!

DOCTOR: You demand?

PATIENT: *(suddenly gracious)* No, of course not. But if you can wait just an hour or two, perhaps I can obtain the money I owe you. Will you let me stay in my room until then? There's a serviceman in the lobby who I am sure will come to the aid of a lady in distress. Especially in the more flattering illumination of my room.

DOCTOR: *(not as hard as before)* This is not a school, and this is not the Flamingo.

PATIENT: *(looking at the DOCTOR in confusion and alarm, then with a look of hope on her face)* Shep? Shep Huntleigh?

DOCTOR: *(somewhat severely)* No.

PATIENT: *(rising and moving away from the DOCTOR, getting more and more agitated)* You're not the proprietor of this establishment. You're one of them! Not a gentleman who tips his hat to a lady. No, one who skitters up the back stairs of the Flamingo in the dead of night, and then in the light of day denounces the degeneracy of the place; who stands shoulder-to-shoulder with his pale, colorless wife and looks you straight in the eye, calling you an abomination, a stain on the character of Laurel, Mississippi; who declares you and your sort have no place in this town. You're one of them. You're the mayor!

DOCTOR: *(calling out)* Nurse!

*(The DOCTOR moves toward the PATIENT as she backs away. The NURSE enters from the direction the PATIENT is headed and grabs hold of her as the PATIENT attempts to flee. The NURSE struggles to subdue the PATIENT.)*

NURSE: You see, Doctor? Uncontrollable. *(calling out)* Randall!

*(The DOCTOR reaches for the syringe. He moves to the PATIENT's side and touches her arm in preparation for injecting her. At the touch, the PATIENT clutches his hand and calms down immediately.)*

PATIENT: *(hopefully)* Shep!

DOCTOR: *(kindly)* No.

*(The DOCTOR motions the NURSE to leave and places the syringe back on the desk. The PATIENT watches the NURSE as she exits.)*

NURSE: *(exiting, with a bit of a sarcastic tone)* Never mind, Randall. Doctor is taking care of the situation.

*(The DOCTOR guides the PATIENT back to her seat, where she sits.)*

PATIENT: *(with a touch of wonder, trailing off at the end)* You saved me from her before. You saved me from him. Your kindness...

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DOCTOR: Yes?

*(The PATIENT's eyes begin to tear up, and she looks about her.)*

PATIENT: I can't seem to find my purse.

*(The DOCTOR offers her a handkerchief.)*

Thank you, sir.

*(She dabs her eyes, then looks at the DOCTOR.)*

Have we met?

DOCTOR: You say I saved you from him. From whom?

*(The PATIENT gasps and looks fearful.)*

From someone in uniform?

*(The PATIENT shakes her head.)*

Who?

PATIENT: *(with a sudden memory)* There was a photograph of him in uniform. From the war. Clean-cut, upstanding, almost too handsome. But I knew him only as a brute of the worst kind – slovenly, coarse, foul in speech and in deed. He took her and dragged her down with him.

DOCTOR: Took whom?

PATIENT: And he took me and dragged me down into his hell. And you saved me. You saved me!

*(The PATIENT takes the DOCTOR's hands in gratitude.)*

DOCTOR: How did I save you?

PATIENT: You took me away. You brought me here.

DOCTOR: And where is “here?”

PATIENT: A place where my truth can live free.

DOCTOR: Your truth? Isn't there only one truth?

PATIENT: *(as if startled by a bright student not grasping a teacher's intent)* Oh, no. No! *(explaining)* Truth is the reality of one moment in time. And after the moment has passed, it's gone. Only the memory remains. The hard edges wear off, like a gemstone being tumbled to burnish it and polish it. And each memory will become clear and gleaming as the rap of the jeweler's chisel reveals the true beauty within. And that beauty will become the truth. It will become my truth.

*(The PATIENT sits, smiling and calm.)*



DOCTOR: *(as a person, and not as a psychiatrist)* That's a lovely way to look at things. Very calming.

*(The DOCTOR and PATIENT share a smile, then the DOCTOR remembers his role and reviews his paperwork.)*

But we need to get your paperwork straightened away. We do have this prescription for you to take. Standard practice upon admission.

*(The DOCTOR positions the syringe ready for use. The PATIENT looks concerned, but remains calm. A bit tentatively, the DOCTOR takes the PATIENT's hand as he leans over the desk.)*

Will you allow me?

PATIENT: Certainly. You may escort me.

*(The PATIENT rises. The DOCTOR picks up the syringe and approaches her. The PATIENT's eyes move from the syringe to the wastebasket, a questioning request in her eyes as she looks at him calmly and graciously. The DOCTOR pauses a moment, then returns a gracious smile. He drops the syringe in the wastebasket, then rips up the prescription present in the file and tosses it into the wastebasket too. He scribbles his signature on a form. The DOCTOR raises a finger, requesting the PATIENT to wait a moment, then picks up the folder and goes to the edge of the stage, speaking quietly and almost warmly.)*

DOCTOR: Nurse, I believe Miss Dubois will go quietly now.

*(The DOCTOR hands off the folder to the NURSE, then returns and offers his arm to the PATIENT.)*

Shall we?

PATIENT: Thank you, sir. You are so kind. Even when it arrives from the most unexpected sources, we must always rely on kindness.

DOCTOR: *(sincerely)* Yes. We must.

*(The DOCTOR begins guiding the PATIENT to the edge of the stage. Blackout.)*

### END OF PLAY

First performed by Onion Man Productions in Chamblee, Georgia in October, 2016, directed by Nick Boretz and featuring a cast consisting of Annie Jacob as the Nurse, Ric Perera as the Doctor, and Deborah Childs as the Patient.

10:4: TENN PLAYWRITING CONTEST WINNER

STEVEN MILLER

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INTERVIEW WITH STEVEN MILLER



**How do you see the themes, setting, or characters in your work reflect the Southern experience? Was this a departure from what you usually write, or is it closely related to your canon?**

By continuing the action of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, my play reflects a Southern experience by default – but the specific Southern experience of Blanche Dubois. This is somewhat of a departure for me. While I have written adaptations of existing works (*Medea*, *A Christmas Carol*, *The Pied Piper*, Twain's *The Diaries of Adam and Eve*), plays in a specific style of the past (Oscar Wilde, French farce), and plays taking place in the South, this is my only instance of taking a character from an existing play and putting her in a new situation.

**Your play brings Blanche Dubois, an iconic female character in the canon of not just Southern drama but American drama, back to the stage. How do you feel you have added to her as a character? Have you presented anything new or raised any questions or provided any nuance regarding who Blanche is or what she has suffered?**

I may not have added anything new to the character of Blanche, but I have tried to clarify a few of the situations alluded to in Williams' play. At the time he wrote, and in the voice he chose for Blanche, decorous language was *de rigueur*. The language in my play is hardly explicit, but by focusing on the sexual liaisons Blanche has perhaps instigated, that part of her history

becomes less diluted. The concept of memories having their edges softened in the rock tumbler of the mind and then being cut into immutable jewels may not come from Williams, but seems to fit the romantic sensibility of Blanche DuBois.

**Can you tell us about your process in playwriting? Has it evolved since first writing this play?**

I often start with a title, using it as a springboard for topics the title suggests (often in a roundabout fashion). That's not the case with *Lunée Bin*, where the title suggested itself after researching what a French sound-alike equivalent for "loony" might be.

For me, the enjoyment in writing a full-length play is akin to reading a book. I may have a firm grasp on the characters in the story and a general idea of where the story is going, but at the end of each scene, I wonder "what's next?" The discovery of that comes about in the writing. It's fun to surprise myself!

The director of the first production of *Lunée Bin* in 2016 insisted on rewrites to cement the dramatic arc of the doctor, from antagonistic to supportive. That was not a pleasant process, since I found myself trying to conform to the workings of a mind with which I felt little in common. I am perhaps more resistant to recommendations made after readings of my work than I should be.

**In crafting a ten-minute play, what is your process in fleshing out your characters so that they appear more than caricatures when you are working with so few pages?**

It's all in the dialogue. Giving individual voices to each character provides a variety of perspectives on the ongoing action. Everyone speaking as a mouthpiece for the playwright tends to provide for didactic, undramatic results.

That's not to say there's anything wrong with caricatures in a comic skit!

**You provide remarkably detailed instructions on how the lines should be read. Do you think actors need such details in order to interpret your characters properly?**

Stage directions are a strange thing. They make sense in the initial reading of a play. Directors should read them, to get a sense of what the playwright envisioned, and brief stage directions can help an actor in a cold read. Design personnel generally ignore them, preferring to realize the vision of the director rather than of the playwright. But for playwriting contests, they make for a much more full-bodied perspective on the action.

Do actors need them? After an initial read, no.

**You are currently living in the Atlanta area. What is the theater scene like there?**

Atlanta has a vibrant theatre scene. The Tony-winning Alliance Theatre is here, along with a handful of other professional companies that employ Equity actors, although often not exclusively. Atlanta has several soundstages used for major motion pictures, and a significant contingent of Atlanta stage actors make a major part of their wages working in film and TV. Danielle Deadwyler, a highly praised actor in the movies *Till* and *The Piano Lesson*, is someone I've admired for years on area stages; now the nation and the world are able to enjoy her talents. Plenty of other actors swing back and forth between stage work and soundstage work.

Community theatre is also alive and relatively well in Atlanta, although Georgia is at the bottom nationally in financial support for the arts. Some theatre companies get assistance from individual city/county governments; many others are all on their own. Venues are a particular problem for community theatres, being at the whim of landlords who may sell a property out from under the company with little notice. Many now-defunct companies owed their resilience to a particular individual who put their heart and soul (and funds) into keeping their company alive until life circumstances moved them in other directions.

Atlanta also boasts multiple organizations devoted strictly to the development of new plays. Readings of plays or segments of plays (usually 10-15 minutes' worth) occur at regular intervals for members of the organizations, with feedback welcomed. Full-length works often go through multiple iterations of readings and feedback.

**We think of places like New York or Chicago where plays are performed, but what advice can you give to writers who can't travel to these places on how best to see their work come alive on a stage?**

Plays are performed all over the country. Particularly for ten-minute plays, there are festivals across the country. Submitting to contests for these festivals gives a playwright chances to get their works seen on stage. I have seen several of my short plays within driving distance, as far afield as Florida, North Carolina, and Mississippi (for the reading of *Lunée Bin* at Mississippi University for Women). Many festivals do video recordings of their productions, which gives a playwright an additional opportunity to view their work one step removed from live performance. My experience, though, is that the videos often are of marginal quality and are not always made available to playwrights, even upon repeated requests.

Networking in your local theatre community is another way to get to see your work onstage. Volunteering in any capacity at a local theatre will

introduce you to people who might be amenable to giving your work a chance to be seen.

If you hope to see your play staged to determine what works or doesn't work, be realistic. When starting out, you are not likely to have a professional director or actors interpreting your work. You may not be involved in the production process at all, and that may result in what you consider wrong-headed or questionable choices. My experience is that you learn far more from a good production than from a bad one. The perception of your play can be unduly and unfairly colored by bad casting, bad acting, or even by a wonderful, charismatic performance by a minor character that throws off the balance of the piece. Be aware if any problems you are seeing in the production stem from factors other than your writing. Hold true to your intentions with the play, even in the face of sub-par production values that blur those intentions.

The same holds true for readings of your plays. A well-cast, rehearsed reading will have all the vocal components of a good production, if not the visuals and the uninterrupted flow.

**Contests are an excellent way for emerging playwrights to get their work into the world. What advice do you give playwrights who are considering the 10:4 Tenn Contest or who are just starting to submit?**

I find that the Play Submissions Helper ([playsubmissionshelper.com](http://playsubmissionshelper.com)) website provides vast opportunities on a monthly basis for determining what contests are ongoing in the English-speaking world, and what criteria all contestants are required to conform to. Many contests are local or regional in scope, or target a specific demographic of playwright. Some require payment of a play-reading/submission fee.

If you're considering the 10:4-Tenn-Contest, get familiar with some aspect of Tennessee Williams' life or work! In my case, I performed the role of the doctor in a production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Since the doctor appears only in the final scene, I had plenty of time backstage to listen to the lines of Williams' script and to imagine what might become of Blanche DuBois following the play's ending.

**Thanks so much for your time, Steven. We look forward to seeing more of your work in the future. Are there any other projects we should keep an eye out for, and where/how can we stay connected with you? (Instagram, Facebook, Website, etc.)**

While I'm not on social media, I do have a playwriting website, best viewed on a computer rather than a mobile device:

[sdmillerga.wixsite.com/plays](http://sdmillerga.wixsite.com/plays)

ANGIE MACRI

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TRUE TO TYPE

First they gave us apples ground into liquid,  
easy on the stomach. Then, when we grew teeth,  
slices, without skin, then with it. By the end,  
a whole apple. Do you expect me to do everything  
for you? And so we washed it under the faucet  
and began biting. Always in the middle, that part  
offering the most flesh, and we were hungry.  
We could grip by the ends and rotate, then work  
outward where we had to watch for the stem

or core now closer to the surface, that husk  
inside. No eating seeds. We'd get sick on them.  
They tasted like wood. They were easy to swallow  
whole, easier than medicine. We waited for the tree  
to start growing inside us. It would bloom  
out the pores of our skin. Our hands would drop  
and turn into fruit that we could put in our mouths  
again and again until our limbs held leaves  
to light and appetite's rhythms. No more asking.

MICHAEL SHOEMAKER

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SIDEWALK ART



## TIME LOOP

Five-till and I'm parked on the side of the road, waiting for the gate to be opened. An empty trail feels like a paused point in time, like the circle I'm walking is a loop I'm reliving over and over, ending up right back where I started. Until the stragglers come, the joggers and early-morning fishers and pointlessly-long phone talkers. Littering my solitude. People who come here to gain something, be it fitness or fun or a sense of being naturistic. Not to escape.

I step over a crack in the concrete, pulling me back to the present. When I look up, an older man is walking towards me from the opposite direction. His cane glides him forward like a paddle does a canoe, the man limping with pride as he shows the world what he is still capable of. I hold my breath, waiting to see if he will wave or speak, if I will be forced to interact and break my trance even further. Whenever this happens—a passerby—there is a moment where the person becomes the only thing that exists, drowning out the trees and sky around us with their presence until they pass. I like to pretend they are Eric, that he rents their bodies just long enough to see me, winking or making a face when I turn my head as a practical joke. He would do that sort of thing.

I look out over the lake in the center of the trail, splattered with lily pads like pastel freckles. Geese guard the edge of the trail, creating a barrier between us and the lake, letting me know it belongs to them. Stay in your lane, concrete crawler, one squawks at me as I pass, red eyes glaring.

"Careful, one of those things chased me down last week," I hear a voice cry out.

I look behind me to see two women I assume to be mother and daughter. One is a dated copy of the other, like an old photograph that's lost its color. A voice comes out of my mouth that doesn't feel like me talking. I am a doll and one of them pulled the string in my back.

"I locked eyes with one and my life flashed before my eyes." It says.

The words feel mechanical to me, but they laugh. In these moments, the ones where I make jokes or enjoy life in general, I imagine that's Eric, too. Like I am stuck on auto pilot, and he takes over to do the things he missed out on in life, or the things he misses doing.

I approach my favorite part of the trail, a small wooden bridge crossing a section of the lake. A cardinal sits on the railing. People say cardinals are our lost loved ones, but I've always hated the cliché. My mother became obsessed with them when my grandfather passed. She would sit on our back



porch watching the same birds as before he died, swearing that one just had to be him, until the next cardinal came along. Our bird feeder became a heaven away from heaven for my grandfather, but I guess it makes sense. He always did love sunflower seeds.

I imagine Eric as a cardinal. He would get my attention then fly in a loop like an airplane, just to see my reaction. More likely, he would take over one of the geese and chase me down, expressing his amusement through quick hissing sounds, like a smoker who wheezes when they laugh.

“You mind?”

I bump shoulders with one of them, a passerby. When we lock eyes, his expression softens and he holds up his hand in a half-wave, as if to say no apology needed before jogging back down the trail. I look back to the railing, but the cardinal is gone. I scan the sky, hoping to find a red speck floating in the distance, or perched in a tree, but there is nothing. No proof it had been anything other than my imagination.

Seeking the secure numbness of my loop, I take a step forward. I hear a chirp from behind me turn around, hoping to see the cardinal. The passerby has stopped running and is facing me.

He winks, and the time loop shatters.

ERICA REID

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MIRROR | REHTOM

When my mirror breaks, it does not shatter—  
it simply refuses to look me in the eye  
anymore. Maybe I ask too much of this world?  
I have heard that before, from my mother  
as I knock on her bedroom door. Locked.

There is something that I need to understand  
and the answer—I am told—lies in faces,  
but nobody will glance my way. More doors  
I did not realize could be locked. Still I knock.  
If the eyes are the windows to the soul, perhaps

somebody left a pair open to the night air,  
and an outcast like me, desperate for warmth,  
might climb in, slick as sin, and lower the lids  
behind her. And no one will find her, because  
no one can see her—not the mother, not the mirror.

## CONTRIBUTORS

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ANDY BROWN, a Tennessee native, works primarily as a regional actor. In the past twenty years, he's had the opportunity to work in or tour in at least thirty-five of the fifty states. Writing has always been another passion of his, and Andy has had work produced at the American College Theatre Festival Ten Minute Play Fest (Region IV), as well as most recently at the Headwaters New Play Festival in Creede, Colorado. When not exploring artistic endeavors, Andy enjoys spending time in the kitchen baking and cooking, out on the trails hiking, or running. Otherwise, he might be sampling a craft brew. Excelsior!

ROHAN BUETTEL lives in Canberra, Australia. His haiku appear in various Australian and international journals (including Presence, Cattails and The Heron's Nest). His longer poetry appears in numerous journals, including *Rattle*, *The Goodlife Review*, *Rappahannock Review*, *Passengers Journal*, *Reed Magazine*, *Meanjin*, *Meniscus* and *Quadrant*. He rides a mountain bike, paddles a kayak and sings in a choir.

KELLEIGH CRAM resides in a small town near Savannah, Georgia with her dog, Maggie. In her free time, she enjoys reading and being outdoors.

KRISTIE FREDERICK DAUGHERTY is a poet and professor at the University of Evansville. She holds an MFA in Poetry from Vermont College of Fine Arts. She is also a PhD candidate in Literature/Criticism at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where she is writing a dissertation which examines how Taylor Swift's lyrics intersect with contemporary poetry. She is the editor of *Invisible Strings: 113 Poets Respond to the Songs of Taylor Swift* which is forthcoming in December 2024 from Random House.

Living on an island near Seattle, JOHN DAVIS is the author of *Gigs* (Sol Books), *Guard the Dead* (Flat Sole Studio) and a chapbook, *The Reservist*. He adores peaches, hiking and kayaking. He merges the glory of blackberry pies with stinging nettle soup. The chase is on with rabbits nibbling his chives and beans in his garden. Broccoli is a lost cause as are carrots and kale. A retired teacher, he moonlights in blues and rock 'n' roll bands. He has published over 500 poems in magazines that include *DMQ Review*, *Harpur Palate*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, *One* and [Terrain.org](http://Terrain.org).

REBECCA DIETRICH is a photographer from Atlantic City. She has published photography in *Welter*, *Wild Roof Journal*, and *Third Street Review*. Her photograph *Cliffs of Moher* was awarded Special Merit in Light Space & Time's 14th annual Seascapes art exhibit. She is a member of the Noyes Museum of Art, where two of her photographs are featured in the Homegrown Expressions: Art Members Unveiled exhibit. Rebecca holds a B.A. in Psychology from Stockton University.

JOHN DORROH has never fallen into an active volcano, nor has he ever caught a hummingbird. He did however manage to bake bread with Austrian monks and drink a healthy portion of their beer. Five of his poems were nominated for Best of the Net. Others appeared in over 100 journals, including *Feral*, *Kissing Dynamite*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, and *River Heron*. Dorroh once won Editor's Choice Award in a regional journal contest and received as a prize enough money for a sushi dinner for two. Living in Southwest Illinois near St. Louis, his home is Columbus, Mississippi, birthplace of Tennessee Williams.

CHRISTA FAIRBROTHER, MA, is the current poet laureate of Gulfport, Florida. Her poetry has appeared in *Arc Poetry*, *Pleiades*, and *Salamander*. She's been a finalist for The Pangea Prize, The Prose Poem Competition, The Leslie McGrath Poetry Prize. She's had residencies with Sundress Academy for the Arts and Bethany Arts Community, and her chapbook, *Chronically Walking*, was a finalist for the Kari Ann Flickinger Memorial Prize. *Water Yoga* (Singing Dragon, 2022), her nonfiction book, won medals from the Nautilus Book Awards and the Florida Writers Association. Connect with her at [www.christafairbrotherwrites.com](http://www.christafairbrotherwrites.com).

After spending many years on the East Coast, DOUG FRITOCK now lives with his family in Redondo Beach, California but still pines away for snow. Previously a tobacco chemist, he has since given up the dark arts and now spends his days driving carpool, tending native plants, swinging kettlebells, and working on poems. His work has appeared in *Little Patuxent Review*.

LYNN D. GILBERT's poems have appeared in or are forthcoming in *Arboreal*, *Bacopa Literary Review*, *Blue Unicorn*, *Consequence*, *Footnote*, *The Good Life Review*, *The McGuffin*, *Sheepshead Review*, and elsewhere. Her poetry volume has been a finalist in the Gerald Cable and Off the Grid Press book contests. A founding editor of *Borderlands: Texas Poetry Review*, she lives in a suburb of Austin and reviews poetry submissions for *Third Wednesday* journal.

KRIS GREEN lives in Florida with his beautiful wife and two savage children. He's been published over 60 times in the last few years by the wonderful people at *Nifty Lit*, *The Haberdasher: Peddlers of Literary Art*, *In Parentheses Magazine*, *Route 7 Review*, *BarBar Magazine*, and many more. He won the 2023 Barbe Best Short Story and Reader's Choice Award for his short story, "Redemption". He has regular nonfiction articles being published by Solid Food Press on fatherhood entitled: "On Raising Savages."

LC GUTIERREZ is a product of many places in the Southern USA and the Caribbean. An erstwhile academic, he now writes, teaches and plays trombone in Madrid, Spain. His work is published or forthcoming in *Notre Dame Review*, *Autofocus*, *Hobart*, *Sugar House Review*, and other wonderful journals. He is a poetry reader for *West Trade Review*. who fuels on sweet, dark chocolate.

JEFFREY HANTOVER is the author of the novels *The Jewel Trader of Pegu* and most recently *The Three Deaths of Giovanni Fumiani* and *The Forenoon Bride*. His poetry and short fiction have appeared in various literary journals.

DAN HECK (he/him) is a writer and Lecturer in Creative Writing at ODU. He graduated from the MFA Creative Writing program at ODU with a concentration in Fiction. His work has been published in *As You Were: Military Review*. Dan won the 2020 Jerri F. Dickeski Fiction Prize and in 2022 he won the Excellence in GTA Teaching: New Teacher Award. Dan lives in Chesapeake, VA, with his fiancée, Gabby, and son Bruce.

MICHAEL GOODWIN HILTON is an award-winning playwright, poet, and short story writer who has had his work developed and produced in festivals across the United States and Europe. He is a two-time recipient of the Governor's Award for Best Play in the State of New Jersey and The Spotlight Award from True Acting Institute, among other honors. His work has appeared in *Tiny Seed Literary Journal*, *After Dinner Conversation*, as well as several Smith & Kraus 'Best of' anthologies. His debut short story collection, *What The Statue Thinks*, was published by Wild Ink Publishing in early 2024. He lives with his family and teaches at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt.

ELIZABETH JOEL is a book reviewer and writer based out of Long Island, New York. She has worked with multiple publishers, such as Avid Reader Press, Bloomsbury US, Hogarth and more to review new releases prepublication. Her first short story, "Do Rocks Get Thirsty?", is set to be published with *Beyond Queer Words* in December 2024. She lives with her partner and three cats.

CARELLA KIEL is a writer and digital artist who splits her time between the ethereal world of dreams, and Toronto, Canada, depending on the weather. She has been published in numerous literary journals including *Columbia Journal*, *Chestnut Review* and *Crannóg*. She is a Pushcart Prize Nominated writer, Best of the Net Nominee and the 2023 Door is a Jar Writing Award Winner in Nonfiction. Her art has featured on the covers of *Glassworks Magazine*, *Nightingale and Sparrow*, *Colors: The Magazine*, *Frost Meadow Review*, *Straylight Magazine* and *Cosmic Daffodil*. Follow her on Instagram @catalogue.of.dreams.

CARA LORELLO began her career as a local journalist in her hometown of Spokane, Washington. She is the author of the poetry chapbook, *But At Least You're Beautiful*. Her poetry and nonfiction writing feature in past issues of *Noble Gas Quarterly*, *Snapdragon Journal*, *Slushpile Magazine*, and the Spokane-based anthology *Railtown Almanac*, among others. Lorello's work draws large inspiration from her rural upbringing and experiences in the Pacific Northwest and features recurrent themes rooted

in nature, art, literature, human relationships, mental psychology, social and feminist history and activism. She currently resides in Spokane.

ANGIE MACRI is the author of *Sunset Cue*, winner of the Lauria/Frasca Poetry Prize, and *Underwater Panther*, winner of the Cowles Poetry Book Prize. Recent poems appear/are forthcoming in *The Common*, *DIAGRAM*, and *Sweet*. An Arkansas Arts Council fellow, she lives in Hot Springs.

BREANNA CEE MARTINS (b. 1987) lives and works in New York City. She has participated in many exhibitions including the Whitney Museum Art Party as the featured artist, La Luz De Jesus' Summer Exhibition, Flowers Gallery, Palazzo Ca Zanardi, Cica Museum, Sloma Museum, and others. She has curated exhibitions at The Lodge Gallery, White Cube Gallery, Klein Projects, and The Lodge NYC. She was Commencement Speaker at the 22nd Graduation Ceremony, New York Academy of Art, NY alongside the artist Jenny Saville, winner of The Richard Kubiak Memorial Curatorial Award, and a Participating Artist in the Sing For Hope Piano project, under the Queensboro Bridge.

MICHELLE McMILLAN-HOLIFIELD is a Best of the Net and Pushcart nominee. She pens poetry, book reviews, fiction, and creative non-fiction. Her work has been included in or is forthcoming in *Boxcar Poetry Review*, *Nelle*, *Sky Island Journal*, *Stirring*, *The Collagist*, *The Main Street Rag*, *Whale Road Review*, and *Windhover*, among others. She hopes you one day find her poetry tacked to a tree somewhere in the Alaskan Wild.

STEVEN D. MILLER studied playwriting at Dartmouth College under John Finch, a mentor to Frank Gilroy ("The Subject Was Roses"), and holds a post-graduate degree in English and Comparative Literature from Columbia University in New York City. His short plays have been produced across the U.S., from Florida to Washington state.

J G ORUDJEV is a collage artist and painter living in Frederick MD. Her work explores the nature of memory, transformative and transitory states, and the act and language of making meaning. She has a background in sculpture and printmaking, and a deep love of craft. Her work has been published and distributed both domestically and internationally. She is a member of NOMA Gallery, Frederick, an artist's cooperative.

ALLISON PADRON has a Master's in Writing from Rowan University. Her short stories have previously been published in *After Dinner Conversation*, ADC's "Best of" 2023 Anthology, and have won second place in the 2022 Edward J. Czwartacki Award for Short Fiction. In her free time, she enjoys reading, trying local coffee shops and bookstores, and visiting national parks. [allisonpadron.com](http://allisonpadron.com). Twitter @apadronwriting

JOSEPH PAYNE is an English professor. Outside of the obvious, he enjoys bike rides, walking through any city, swimming, and well-written TV shows.

He lives quietly with his cat, who is a great inspiration to him. His fiction has been published by *Fleas on the Dog*, *Light and Dark*, and the *Arlington Literary Journal* and others.

JULIA PHILIPP grew up in a multicultural family outside of Philadelphia. She spent two years in Cameroon as a Peace Corps volunteer and six years in Indonesia as a management consultant. Her first book, *Cash Cow Burgers and Other Culinary Secrets*, was published by TimesBooks International in Singapore. A second book is in the works. Julia lives in Bethesda, Maryland, with her husband, Sam, and their two dogs, Scout and Rosie.

ERICA REID's debut collection *Ghost Man on Second* won the 2023 Donald Justice Poetry Prize and was published by Autumn House Press in 2024. Erica's poems appear in *Rattle*, *Cherry Tree*, *Colorado Review*, and more. [ericareidpoet.com](http://ericareidpoet.com)

ANGEL ROSEN is a queer poet living near Pittsburgh, PA. She is passionate about art, mental health, and friendship. Previously published *HAD*, *Olney*, *JAKE*, and others, her work can be found at [angelrosen.com](http://angelrosen.com)! Become her friend on social media @Axiopoeticus.

JACQUELINE SCHAALJE lives in Tel Aviv, Israel, where she tries to maintain a balance between language tutoring, writing and going out (into nature!). Her interest in feminist issues, relationships and equality have led her to write journalistic pieces in the past, but today she operates firmly in the expansive and ultimately more satisfying field of literature. She has published poetry and short fiction, most recently in *Five South*, *Wildfire Words*, and *The Ocotillo Review*. She won the 2022 Florida Review Editor's Prize and has been a finalist in a few other competitions. She is a translation editor at *MAYDAY Magazine*.

MICHAEL SHOEMAKER is a poet, photographer and writer from Magna, Utah. He is the author of a poetry/photography collection *Rocky Mountain Reflections and Grasshoppers in the Field*. His photography has appeared in *Writers on the Range*, *Sea to Sky Review*, *Denver Post*, *Salt Lake Tribune*, [Yahoo.com](http://Yahoo.com) and elsewhere. He lives in Magna, Utah with his wife and son where he enjoys looking out on the Great Salt Lake every day. His online photography portfolio is at [michaelshoemaker.crevado.com](http://michaelshoemaker.crevado.com). Michael has been nominated for the Best of the Net anthology in 2025 for his photograph "Flashflood Waterfall".

Born in Nevada and raised in California, DON SCHOFIELD is a graduate of CSU, Sacramento and University of Montana. A resident of Greece for many years, he has taught literature and creative writing at American, British and Greek universities, and traveled extensively throughout Europe, the Middle East and farther afield. Fluent in Greek, a citizen of both his homeland and his adopted country, he is the editor of *Kindled Terraces: American Poets in*

Greece and has published six books of poetry in the US, the first of which, *Approximately Paradise* was a finalist for the Walt Whitman Award, and a more recent collection, *In Lands Imagination Favors*, was finalist for the Rubery Book Award (UK). Currently he lives with his companion Aleka in both Athens and Thessaloniki.

MATT THOMAS is a smallholder farmer, engineer, and poet. His recent work can be read in *Pinhole Poetry*, *Susurrus*, *Halfway Down the Stairs*, *Copihue Poetry*, *Temz Review*, and elsewhere. *Disappearing by the Math*, a full-length collection, was published by Silver Bow in 2024. He lives with his family in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia.

When she's not working on her debut novel, ELIZABETH WHITTINGTON works in healthcare communications in Memphis, Tennessee. She lives in north Mississippi with her family, three dogs, one cat, and the ghost of a bearded dragon.

ELLEN JUNE WRIGHT was born in England but lives in New Jersey. Her work revolves around the power of color and the emotions and memories they evoke. She is inspired by the works of Stanley Whitney, Mary Lovelace O'Neal and Frank Bowling. Her art was published online by *Gulf Stream Magazine*, *Wild Roof Journal*, *Breakwater Review*, *Burningword Literary Journal* and is forthcoming in *Kitchen Table Quarterly*. To learn more visit: [ellenjunewright.com](http://ellenjunewright.com)

CYNTHIA YATCHMAN is a Seattle based artist. She has exhibited extensively in the northwest, including shows at Seattle University, Seattle Pacific University, Shoreline Community College, the Tacoma Convention Center, and the Seattle Pacific Science Center.

수연 최 ZANOO CHOI (SUYOUN CHOI) is an artist living and working in South Korea who aims to express the uncertainties and ambiguities, contradictions and desires within the self.